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February 2026

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Jamie Evans, Managing Editor

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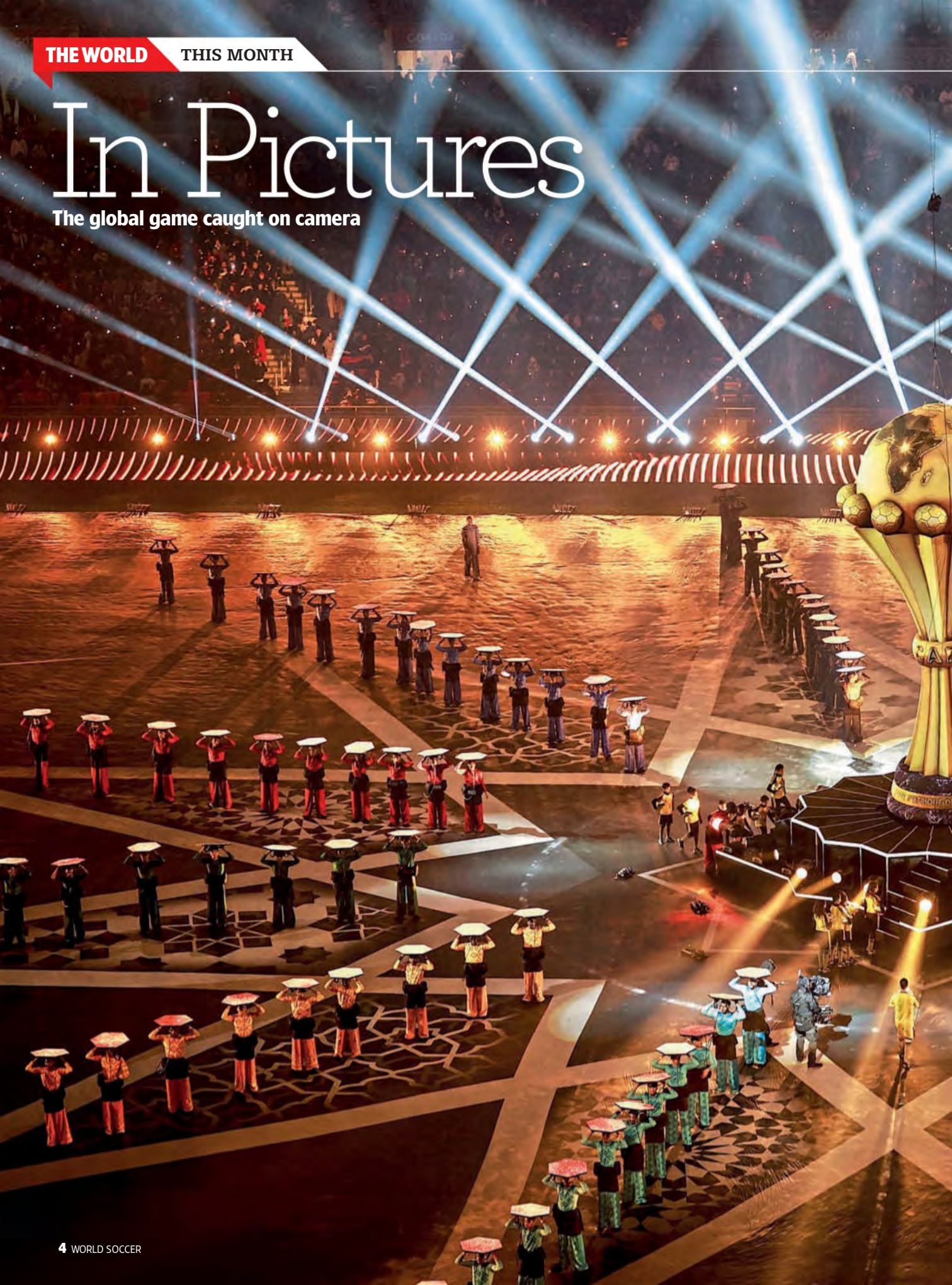

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Henry WINTER
THE VOICE OF FOOTBALL

Good luck, Liam Rosenior – you'll need it

In the hot seat... new Chelsea boss Liam Rosenior

Many questions have followed Liam Rosenior into Stamford Bridge. Most significant is: what exactly is success for him at Chelsea? As an ambitious head coach, Rosenior wants to challenge for the major honours. Supporters want him to guide them to serious silverware – not just the Conference League and Club World Cup – and with entertaining football. Chelsea's owners, BlueCo, want him to finesse young talents and finish in the money-spinning Champions League positions. Rosenior can't do them all. An inherent tension exists at the heart of his job specification.

It will be fascinating to see how this charismatic and widely-respected 41-year-old coach fares in the strange, demanding realm of Chelsea Football Club. Rosenior is the ninth permanent coach in ten years at Chelsea (plus two caretakers and Frank Lampard twice). That six-year contract looks ambitious.

He's enjoyed a promising journey so far as a coach. He stepped confidently from a well-regarded career as a mobile, intelligent full-back good enough at Fulham to shackle Cristiano Ronaldo during the flying winger's early days at Manchester United. He began as assistant coach of Brighton & Hove Albion Under-23s, then moved on to Derby County to become specialist first-team coach to Phillip Cocu and then assistant to Wayne Rooney.

When Rooney left, Rosenior enjoyed a fine spell in charge but was then let go, a moment of real controversy considered one of owner David Clowes' few mistakes at Derby. He impressed at Hull City before another owner error by Acun Ilicali saw him leave. It has been notable since Rosenior's appointment at Chelsea how many fans of Derby and Hull have posted good wishes on social media. I've interviewed Rosenior three times down the years and every time the comments are filled with positivity. Brighton fans remember his playing and

coaching days fondly and also how much they enjoyed bumping into him in Lancing, where Brighton train, or in Brighton itself. "Always happy to stop for a chat" was the usual praise. Rosenior is instantly likeable.

Chelsea spotted his talent as a coach and appointed him at Strasbourg, which BlueCo also owns. As in France, Rosenior will now be expected to develop talent that BlueCo will eventually sell on. Rosenior's Juniors will be worth watching, but how long will they stay together? This is a problem that Rosenior's predecessor, Enzo Maresca, faced. He wanted the club to recruit an experienced, battle-ready centre-back when Levi Colwill was injured last year but Chelsea insisted he persist with the teenager Josh Acheampong. More development potential.

Rosenior is expected to continue this role as a development coach as well as chaser of cups.

Having such a young squad – Chelsea have the youngest in the Premier League (23.7) – means a sustained challenge for the title or the Champions League is unlikely. Youngsters are prone to mistakes and inconsistency. The question that Chelsea fans ask is whether BlueCo is after glory or simply strong financial returns from player sales, where the balance sheet appears more important than the team-sheet.

Rosenior's record with young players is very much part of his appeal to BlueCo. During his time as Strasbourg coach, Rosenior used twice as many Under-21 players as any other coach in Europe, according to *Transfermarkt*. He gave 15,101 minutes to young players with the closest being Luis Enrique at Paris Saint-Germain (7,454) and then Maresca at Chelsea (6,737).

BlueCo adopted this model for financial reasons, knowing that it can train up young players and then sell them on. Rosenior knows he's in a trading operation.

Yet he's always backed youth. Liam Delap, Tyler Morton and Fabio Carvalho all did well on loan under him at Hull. Jacob Greaves was 21 when coming under Rosenior's sway at Hull; by the time Rosenior was crazily dismissed by Ilicali, for just missing out on the Championship play-offs in 2024, Greaves was being voted into the Championship Team of the Season.

Dealing with young players requires additional emotional intelligence. Some may feel homesick. Some are vulnerable to the toxicity of social media. Some come from broken homes and often lack a strong father figure in their lives. Rosenior is very good at the pastoral side of management. It's little surprise to learn that his mother Karen worked as a social worker involved in child adoption. His father Leroy was a talented winger and remains a campaigning force against the poison of racism.

Rosenior grew up with a strong conscience – and also a desire to be a coach ever since helping his father with scouting reports during Leroy's time as a non-league manager. Liam was just 11 at the time and already showing an interest in what makes players and teams tick.

Rosenior is the ninth permanent coach in ten years at Chelsea – that six-year contract looks ambitious

It's really important that he survives for three reasons. Firstly, Rosenior's a progressive coach and his involvement at a Champions League club will lend more credibility to English coaches. England need a deeper talent pool of coaches, especially when the FA looks for a successor to Thomas Tuchel after the World Cup.

Rosenior, who's told me in the past of his ambition to manage England, would join the likes of Eddie Howe and Lee Carsley in contention for the role, with the FA determined to appoint someone homegrown after Tuchel.

Secondly, Rosenior succeeding at Chelsea will encourage more black players to take up coaching. Currently, too many players coming to the end of their playing career eschew coaching badges because they feel there is a glass ceiling for black coaches. Rosenior shows you can smash through that. Premier League dugouts do not reflect the fact that black players make up 43% of squads. Rosenior could help redress the balance.

Thirdly, Rosenior surviving would be good for Chelsea's financial situation. They have spent more than £100 million on compensation. The churn of managers is unhealthy. Some stability would be good – but very unlike Chelsea. Good luck to Liam. He'll need it.

• **Ask Henry:** Submit your questions to Henry Winter by subscribing to our newsletter at *worldsoccer.com*

Rest in peace, Martin Chivers

The sad news that Martin Chivers passed away on January 7, aged 80, prompted widespread sadness in football, especially at the prolific striker's former clubs, Southampton and Tottenham Hotspur. The news also felt poignant from an England perspective heading towards a World Cup summer. Chivers' final cap was in the infamous 1-1 draw with Poland at Wembley in 1973 which cost England their chance of making the 1974 World Cup. Chivers contributed to the 35 efforts on goal but only Allan Clarke could find a way past Jan Tomaszewski, the Polish keeper dubbed a "circus clown in gloves" by Brian Clough on ITV. Chivers was substituted for Kevin Hector late on and it was a sad way for his England career to finish. He scored 13 goals in 24 internationals from 1971 to 1973, and was outstanding in that period for Spurs, one of the most unstoppable strikers in club football in England and Europe. He won the League Cup twice and the UEFA Cup in that golden period. Defences couldn't handle Chivers' pace, power and eye for goal. What a player.

Spurs hero... Martin Chivers

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

AFCON to become a quadrennial event

But who stands to gain from the Africa Cup of Nations' new schedule?

Africa's main event ...AFCON will take place every four years from 2028

European clubs and coaches doubtless thought Christmas had come early when CAF president Patrice Motsepe persuaded the African confederation's executive to break with history in approving a proposal to stage the Cup of Nations every four years instead of every two.

The European gripe at being forced to release players every other mid-season is an old one but long resented by many African football leaders who perceive more than a whiff of out-dated neo-colonialism; European clubs should be grateful to benefit from Africa's bottomless well of talent.

Putting AFCON on a time schedule in line with the European Championship and Copa America is a piece of neat housekeeping for FIFA as it reshapes the international calendar. Additionally, the move ensures the certain removal of AFCON from the promotional run-up to the World Cup finals.

Motsepe said the next Cup of Nations, scheduled for 2027 in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, will go ahead and then another tournament would be held in 2028 before the eventual four-year switch. So far so good for one of FIFA supremo Gianni Infantino's most loyal of confederation presidents. However, the African finals generate around 80% of CAF's revenue and this basic fact of life has prompted unrest below the headlines.

CAF is planning to fill the fixtures void with its own Nations League, kicking off in 2029. Yet this can hardly fill the financial hole feared by smaller African FAs. Probably Motsepe, with Infantino's approval, has a mind to expand the AFCON finals – World Cup style – from 24 teams to 32 in order to appease some of the doubters. Still, the rumblings may continue for not merely months but years.

Motsepe can envisage only a golden future – after all, has this not been Infantino's dream for Africa ever since his accession to the FIFA presidency in 2016? Motsepe said: "Historically the Nations Cup was the prime resource for us but now we will get financial resources every year. It is an exciting new structure, which will contribute to sustainable financial independence and ensure more synchronisation with the FIFA calendar."

Motsepe also sought to engage player sympathy and support, saying: "This is in the interests of the teams, clubs and players. I can't have players leaving their clubs in Europe in the mid-season. It's wrong. We've got

a duty to the players. We know how frustrating it is for the players when their club says they are needed but they are also needed for the country.

"It's unfair to the players. We are solving this problem for us in Africa and for our African players."

On the face of it, European football stands to benefit far more than the African game. Many European FAs and clubs continue to nurture a simplistic view of Africa, its politics and climate variations and resultant tournament confusions. Staging AFCON is not like organising UEFA's Euros finals (setting aside the historical fact that the Africa Cup of Nations is older than the European Championship). Its long history is full of scheduling and rescheduling shifts to meet the continent's varied climates as much as political instability and infrastructure weaknesses.

For example, Madagascar's Ahmad Ahmad, Motsepe's predecessor as CAF president, switched the Cup of Nations to mid-year from 2019, but later tournaments scheduled for the summer in Cameroon in 2021 and Ivory Coast in 2023 shifted to the start of the following year. The latest edition in Morocco was also moved back six months when FIFA introduced its new-look Club World Cup in the United States last June and July.

From a distance, the four-year switch makes evolutionary sense. The early years of the tournament during the 1960s and 1970s were chaotic. Some governments had to be cajoled into playing host with poor pitches and stadia hastily patched together for teams who had flown in on risky charter or military planes. African nations were, after all, only just emerging into an independent, post-colonial world. New states and their governments (and dictators) had other priorities than football. It says much for the power of the game that AFCON has flourished, almost despite itself.

Succeeding FIFA presidents have long understood the political value of Africa and its football associations. Brazil's Joao Havelange ousted Sir Stanley Rous as FIFA president in 1974 thanks significantly to the behind-the-scenes manipulation of the African federations by Adidas boss Horst Dassler. Issa Hayatou remained firmly in place as CAF president between 1988 and 2017 by negotiating financial favours for Africa in exchange for block votes at FIFA congress.

The lack of a firm, progressive hand on the African confederation meant organisational drift, which was reflected in negative perceptions beyond Africa of the Cup of Nations itself. That fuelled European attitudes to the biennial player release at unpredictable times of the calendar.

On the face of it, European football stands to benefit far more than the African game

Infantino, on election in 2016, sought to get a grip – with FIFA's interests playing a significant role. Secretary-general Fatma Samoura being seconded to Cairo proved counter-productive. Only now, with billionaire businessman Motsepe in the presidency, and Infantino's old university pal Veron Mosengo-Omba installed as general secretary, can his will finally be done.

Whether Africa's football associations will ultimately support the four-year switch is another matter. The revenue drip-feed is one issue while political pride is another.

Claude Le Roy, the former Cameroon, Senegal, DR Congo, Ghana, Congo and Togo coach, described the cycle change as "appalling nonsense" with further criticism coming from Mali coach Tom Saintfiet and Egypt's Hossam Hassan. Saintfiet considered the change "disrespectful to African football" while Hassan accused his bosses of ignoring the wellbeing needs of African football. He said: "As an Egyptian and an African, I see that these decisions are being made with European clubs in mind."

One player who dared put his head above the parapet was Nigeria forward Ademola Lookman. He said the decision was a "shame" and a "disappointment", and thought the ultimate price would be paid by African fans and players, lamenting both the loss of a popular and distinctive tradition and fewer opportunities to enjoy AFCON's regular rhythm.

But then Lookman is a player and who ever worried about their opinions?

Allies...FIFA president Gianni Infantino and Confederation of African Football supremo Patrice Motsepe

BOOKS THIS MONTH

BILL McCRACKEN, THE OFFSIDE KING
By Paul Joannou
(Pitch Publishing, £19.99)

Bill McCracken, the Offside King is the first biography of a football pioneer and Newcastle United legend who forced a change which altered how football was played. Known as the "Offside King" for his perfect execution of the offside trap, the Belfast-born full-back was a key figure in Newcastle's famous Edwardian line-up. Discover the colourful career and life of a hugely influential figure in this superbly researched biography.

JUNGLE DAYS
By John Wight
(Pitch Publishing, £18.99)

Blending personal memoir with social history, John Wight spares nothing in his appraisal of Celtic as a cause to live by rather than just a club to support, with a special focus on the 1980s. During this tempestuous decade, when Thatcher and Thatcherism ruled the roost, like so many others from his background, Wight found sanctuary and meaning in Celtic.

Jonathan WILSON
TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

The rule of three

Ruben Amorim's failure at Manchester United is the latest evidence of a back three not being suitable for English football

For Ruben Amorim, the Manchester United job was probably over from the moment he deviated away from the 3-4-2-1 he had always insisted he could never abandon. Once his faith in that system was lost, so too was he. Or perhaps causality was the other way round, and he realised around Christmas that the club would no longer back his fundamentalism.

In part, the change of shape in his final games was a response to an injury crisis and allied to three players being away at the Africa Cup of Nations. But a switch that might in other circumstances have been seen as an admirable flexibility, a willingness to respond to circumstance, became instead, because of Amorim's previous stubbornness, a sign of weakness. When you've been wedded to a particular way of playing for 18 months and suddenly change, people are going to ask why.

But there is a more fundamental question here, particularly with Oliver Glasner likely to leave Crystal Palace when his contract expires at the end of the season. Is the 3-4-2-1 a system that can win the Premier League? History tends to suggest not. Since 1962-63 when Harry Catterick's Everton were the last side to win the league with a W-M, only Chelsea under Antonio Conte in 2016-17 have won the English league title with a back three. To an extent that is culturally determined; since winning the World Cup with a back four in 1966, English football has been predisposed to a back four.

Sacked...Ruben Amorim's 3-4-2-1 formation failed at Manchester United

Equally, football is not a sport that can endure inefficiency. If a back three was going to be more effective in English football, somebody would have done it and it would have worked. Why, then, might it not be suitable for English football? It may be something to do with the extreme pace of the English game; the demands on a wing-back are perhaps just too great.

Conte wasn't just using a back three, but was playing a 3-4-2-1, which proves that the league can be won with that system. That is the great counter-example. But it's worth looking at Conte's team. At the back of midfield, he had N'Golo Kante who, quite apart from his other abilities, had probably the greatest engine the Premier League has ever known. Alongside him was either Cesc Fabregas, one of the greatest passers the league has known, or Nemanja Matic, perhaps not quite at the level of the other two, but a tough and intelligent player nonetheless. The two No.10s, meanwhile, were Eden Hazard, one of the best creators the Premier League has known, and Pedro, who proved the perfect foil with his late runs into the box. So with players of the very highest order, the system can work.

> Is the 3-4-2-1 a system that can win the Premier League? History tends to suggest not

That Chelsea had one other huge advantage, which is that in their back three they had David Luiz, who was extremely comfortable stepping

Key man...did Amorim's system require a player like David Luiz?

into midfield. That meant that the problem United had when facing a team that sits deep against them, was that they were left with three at the back guarding against one forward (sometimes none), which meant they ended up effectively playing with ten men. Having David Luiz stepping forward offered that Chelsea flexibility, different angles of attack, and gave the other midfielders a little more licence to roam. United simply never had that.

A 3-4-2-1 is a useful formation for a side looking to sit deep, absorb pressure and attack on the break – as Crystal Palace have proved under Glasner. With a back three and two holding players, it offers immediately the trapezoid shape the majority of modern coaches like as their basic set-up to guard against the counter. Although the only real width comes from the wing-backs, that matters less if they are getting forward only occasionally; there is less risk of burnout. And if the majority of attacks go through one or both of the two No.10s, that also matters less for a side more focused on defence.

But for a team such as United for whom there is usually an onus to attack, it's a formation that seems a little blocky and predictable. If the bulk of the creating goes through the No.10s, opponents can simply mark them. The wing-backs end up tearing up and down all game. And the two holders can be dragged side to side by an intelligent opponent and have little freedom because of the potential consequences if they desert their post.

That's not to say that it cannot work for a side with the right players. But when Amorim arrived at United, he inherited a side with almost zero experience of playing a 3-4-2-1 and even with £450 million of expenditure over two windows never really looked like assembling one.

As a way of playing for an elite side, 3-4-2-1 appears to have some obvious drawbacks, but in matters of tactics there are few absolutes. The biggest issue for Amorim was his insistence on carrying on with it when it simply wasn't appropriate.

2026 Calendar

FEBRUARY

1 FIFA Women's Champions Cup final
2 Winter transfer window closes
3 CONCACAF Champions Cup kicks off
Copa Libertadores preliminaries
13 CAF CL groups stage ends
17 UEFA Champions League play-offs
18 AFC CL Elite league stage ends
21 MLS season kicks off

MARCH

1 Women's Asian Cup kicks off
2 AFC Champions League Elite knockouts
3 Women's European World Cup qualifying kicks off
10 UEFA Champions League knockouts
13 CAF Champions League knockouts
17 Women's AFCON kicks off
21 Women's Asian Cup final
22 EFL Cup final
23 2027 AFCON qualifying kicks off
26-31 Inter-confederation World Cup play-offs
European World Cup play-offs
27 Finalissima: Spain v Argentina
31 2027 Asian Cup qualifying ends

WAFCON...can Nigeria defend their crown?

APRIL

3 Women's AFCON final
7 Copa Libertadores group stage kicks off
18 OFC Pro League league phase ends
25 AFC Champions League Elite final
TBC Spanish Cup final

MAY

13 Italian Cup final
16 FA Cup final
Bundesliga & Ligue 1 final days
Women's Super League final day
CAF Champions League final first leg
20 Europa League final
23 Women's UEFA Champions League final
CAF Champions League final second leg
French Cup & German Cup finals
EFL Championship play-off final
24 Premier League final day
La Liga & Serie A final days
OFC Pro League final
25 European U17 Championship kicks off
27 Conference League final
30 UEFA Champions League final
CONCACAF Champions Cup final

JUNE

7 European U17 Championship final
11 2026 FIFA World Cup kicks off
27 Women's European U19 Championship kicks off
28 European U19 Championship kicks off

JULY

7 UEFA 2026-27 continental club competition qualifiers kick off
10 Women's European U19 Championship final
11 European 19 Championship final
19 2026 FIFA World Cup final
24 ASEAN Championship kicks off
TBC SAFF Club Championship

Main event...all eyes will be on the World Cup in 2026

AUGUST

11 Copa Libertadores knockouts
12 UEFA Super Cup
15 FA Community Shield
WAFF Championship kicks off
22 2025-26 Premier League kicks off
26 ASEAN Championship final
27 2026-27 UEFA CL, Europa League & Conference League draws
28 WAFF Championship final

SEPTEMBER

5 Women's U20 World Cup kicks off
7 2026-27 UEFA Champions League kicks off
16 2026-27 Europa League kicks off
22 2026-27 Women's UEFA Champions League kicks off
23 Arabian Gulf Cup kicks off
24 2026-27 UEFA Nations League kicks off
27 Women's U20 World Cup final
TBC 2026-27 CONCACAF Nations League kicks off
TBC SAFF Championship

OCTOBER

6 Arabian Gulf Cup final
15 2026-27 Conference League kicks off

NOVEMBER

7 MLS regular season final day
16 2027 AFCON qualifying ends
21 Copa Sudamericana final
28 Copa Libertadores final
TBC U17 World Cup
TBC Women's inter-confederation World Cup play-offs phase one

DECEMBER

5 Women's European World Cup qualifying ends
6 Euro 2028 qualifying draw
TBC MLS Cup final
TBC FIFA Intercontinental Cup

All dates subject to change

"Today, I have recommended to the Board that the Bridgford Stand be renamed 'The John Robertson Stand' in his honour and in lasting recognition of his extraordinary contribution to our club"

Nottingham Forest owner Evangelos Marinakis honours club legend John Robertson after his passing on Christmas Day

OBITUARIES

European Cup hero...Robertson after the 1979 final

John ROBERTSON (1953-2025)
Robertson was the unlikely superstar of one of the most unlikely European club champions. Quietly spoken and apparently built more for a park stroll than a European club final, he was the creative heartbeat of Brian Clough's Nottingham Forest, the Scot whose left foot delivered the decisive moments that turned provincial dreamers into kings of Europe.

Robertson joined Forest as a raw teenager in 1973. His first months at the City Ground were unpromising; he struggled with fitness, confidence and self-belief, and was languishing in the reserves in 1974. It could have been the end of the road for most young footballers – but then Clough arrived.

Clough and his assistant Peter Taylor saw something others had missed: a rare football intelligence and an exquisite first touch. Robertson was put on a strict fitness regime and transformed physically and mentally. He was not a traditional winger, drifting in from the left at will. He did not rely on pace or trickery, but changes of direction and a left foot that could weight a pass with surgical precision.

The associated rise of both Forest and Robertson was meteoric. In 1977, they were promoted from the Second Division. A year later, they were champions of England. Their defining moments then came on the greatest of club stages. In the 1979 European Cup final in Munich against Malmo, Robertson delivered the cross that was dive-headed home by Trevor Francis. A year later, in Madrid, he did it again v Hamburg at the Santiago Bernabeu. Robertson, as Clough had promised, turned their fine right-back Manni Kaltz "inside-out" and popped up with the goal that beat Hamburg. In all, he played over 500 games for Forest, scoring 61 goals and creating countless more. He won the First Division title, two League Cups, two European Cups and the UEFA Super Cup.

Robertson once recalled: "Brian Clough used to rib me about my desert boots and the gear I wore – and how I appeared in the morning, unshaven. He said I was scruffy and unfit. But he said a lot of nice things about me as well. The reason I never got upset or reacted to his comments was simple – I knew he respected me as a player."

Between 1978 and 1983, Robertson also won 28 Scotland caps, appearing at both the 1978 and 1982 World Cups. But his "greatest goal" he said, was the winner against England at Wembley in the 1980-81 British Home Championship.

After his playing career ended in 1985, Robertson went on to work with his former Forest team-mate Martin O'Neill as assistant manager of Wycombe Wanderers, Norwich City, Leicester City, Celtic and Aston Villa.

Marijan CERCEK (1949-2025)
Croatian midfielder who scored for Dinamo Zagreb in their 2-0 aggregate win over Leeds in the 1967 Fairs Cup final.

Terry WHARTON (1942-2025)
Right-winger who played 242 games for Wolves from 1959 to 1968, and also won a title in the US with Los Angeles Wolves.

Bulgarian icon... Dimitar Penev

Dimitar PENEV (1945-2026)
One of the outstanding personalities in Bulgarian football before and after the fall of the Iron Curtain, winning 90 caps in central defence between 1964 and 1977. Footballer of the Year in 1967 and 1971 who won the league seven times and the cup on five occasions with CSKA Sofia. Enjoyed three spells in charge of Bulgaria's national team, notably leading them to a best-ever fourth place in the 1994 World Cup. That achievement made him a hero and, after his death was announced, thousands of people attended a ceremony at the National Stadium in Sofia to pay their respects.

Bradford boss... Terry Yorath in 1989

Terry YORATH (1950-2026)
A legend of Welsh football, scoring twice in 59 caps and captaining his country 42 times, before later managing the national team and almost guiding the Dragons to the 1994 World Cup. As a combative midfielder, Yorath made his name at Don Revie's Leeds, making 199 appearances for the Whites between 1967 and 1976, winning the First Division in 1974. The following year, he became the first Welshman to play in a European Cup final, losing 2-0 to Bayern Munich. After leaving Leeds, Yorath went on to play for Coventry City, Tottenham Hotspur, Vancouver Whitecaps and Bradford City, where he was player-manager during the Valley Parade fire. His daughter is the BBC *Match of the Day* presenter Gabby Logan.

England international ...Martin Chivers

Martin CHIVERS (1945-2026)
With 174 goals in 367 games, only three players have scored more goals for Tottenham Hotspur than Chivers, who won two League Cups and the UEFA Cup during his eight years at the club. Made his name at Southampton before moving to White Hart Lane, and later won trophies with Swiss side Servette, as well as scoring 13 goals in 24 England internationals.

"His smile was unforgettable. He was always smiling. Dimitar Penev was a coach, a father and a friend. I had the luck to work under him for many years and will forever be thankful to him"

Bulgaria legend Hristo Stoichkov pays tribute to one of his country's greatest sporting figures, the late Dimitar Penev

Glen DE BOECK (1971-2025)
Defender who won 36 caps for Belgium and played at the 1998 and 2002 World Cups. Enjoyed a successful decade at Anderlecht, winning three league titles.

Gokmen OZDENAK (1947-2025)
Striker who won four Turkish league titles during 13 years at Galatasaray between 1967 and 1980, before later working as a sports writer and commentator.

Ernesto FIGUEIREDO (1937-2025)
Portuguese centre-forward who played a key role in Sporting's only European trophy success in the Cup Winners' Cup in 1964. His brace secured a 3-3 draw with MTK Budapest and Sporting duly won the replay. In 1965-66 he was the league's joint-top scorer with Eusebio on 25 goals, which earned his selection for the World Cup but he never played in the finals. Won only six caps because his career coincided with Benfica heroes Jose Aguas and Jose Torres. Hit 100 goals in 155 league games for Sporting over eight years before a spell with Vitoria Setubal.

Ludovic ASSEMOASSA (1980-2025)
Lyon-born left-back who played six times for Togo, including at the 2006 World Cup and Africa Cup of Nations.

Colin McDONALD (1930-2026)
Long-serving Burnley goalkeeper who played 201 games during two spells at the club. He made history for the Clarets as the first player from the club to play at a World Cup, starting all four of England's games at the 1958 finals, and subsequently finished 11th in that year's Ballon d'Or voting.

Carlos CARDOSO (1944-2025)
Magnificently loyal defender then coach with Vitoria Setubal. Spent his entire playing career with the club between 1964 and 1977, when they were twice winners of the Portuguese Cup.

Jean-Louis GASSET (1953-2025)
Montpellier midfielder who then served as assistant to Laurent Blanc at Bordeaux, France and PSG from 2007 to 2016. He was appointed coach of Ivory Coast in 2022 and led the hosts to the finals of the 2023 AFCON but was sacked after a disappointing group stage. Left his last role, at Montpellier, in April.

World Cup star... Glen De Boeck

Influential figure ...Age Hareide

Ex-England goalkeeper ...Colin McDonald

Veteran coach... Jean-Louis Gasset

Enrique COLLAR (1934-2025)
An intelligent and skilful outside-left who was restricted to just 16 caps (five goals) for Spain because he was a contemporary of Real Madrid's remarkable Paco Gento. Collar captained Atletico Madrid from 1960 to 1969, scoring 105 goals in 470 games in all comps. His Atletico trophy haul included one league title, three cups and the 1962 UEFA Cup Winners' Cup.

Age HAREIDE (1953-2025)
One of Norway's most influential figures, first as an international defender and then as coach. Played for Manchester City and Norwich City, and won 50 Norway caps between 1976 and 1986.

But it was as a coach that Hareide left his deepest mark. Won titles in Norway with Molde, Sweden with Helsingborgs and Malmo, and Denmark with Brondby, which provided a springboard to national team appointments.

He spent five years as boss of Norway from 2003 to 2008, then led Denmark to the 2018 World Cup finals where they lost on penalties to Croatia in the last 16. He then qualified the Danes for Euro 2020 but his contract expired before the postponed finals. His final role was as manager of Iceland in 2023-24.

Ethan McLEOD (2004-2025)
Macclesfield forward who tragically lost his life in a car accident. A Wolverhampton Wanderers academy graduate who joined the club at the age of seven.

Marvin HINTON (1940-2025)
Right-back or centre-back who played 344 games for Chelsea between 1963 and 1976, winning the FA Cup in 1970. Unlucky never to have played for England.

Dixie DEANS (1946-2025)
Centre-forward at Celtic after arriving from Motherwell in 1971. Deans scored 124 goals in 184 games over five years, winning three league titles, two Scottish Cups and one League Cup. His six goals in a win over Partick Thistle in 1973 is a post-war record for a single game. Deans is also the only player in Scottish football history to have scored hat-tricks in two major finals, the 1972 cup final and the 1974 League Cup final, both against Hibernian. Played only twice for Scotland, both in the autumn of 1974 after being overlooked for that year's World Cup.

Bernard HALL (1942-2025)
Bristol Rovers goalkeeper between 1962 and December 31, 1966, when he was knocked unconscious in a collision with Middlesbrough's John O'Rourke. Hall spent 16 days in a coma. He recovered but not sufficiently to play football again.

Gary ROWELL (1957-2025)
Iconic Sunderland forward who scored 103 goals in 297 games between 1972 and 1984, including a hat-trick in the Tyne-Wear derby against Newcastle United in 1979 – the last Black Cats player to score a treble in the fixture.

Alex SANCHEZ (1930-2025)
Left-back who played 32 times for Costa Rica between 1950 and 1963 and won three league titles with Saprissa.

Essau KANYENDA (1982-2025)
Striker who scored 21 goals in 71 games for Malawi between 1999 and 2015. One of the few exports to Europe from the African country, playing at Rostov and Lokomotiv Moscow and later in Denmark.

Mario PINEIDA (1992-2025)
Ecuador full-back who won nine caps during nine years with Barcelona SC. Later loaned to Brazil's Fluminense and El Nacional of Quito. Was fatally shot in Guayaquil in December.

Volodymyr MUNTYAN (1946-2025)
Ukrainian midfielder who was one of the key members of the Dynamo Kyiv team that won nine domestic trophies in the 1960s and '70s as well as the European Cup Winners' Cup and UEFA Super Cup. Won 49 caps (scoring seven goals) for the Soviet Union between 1968 and 1976, including at the 1970 World Cup. Hailed as Soviet Footballer of the Year in 1969. As a coach, he led Guinea to the finals of the Africa Cup of Nations in 1998.

Arcadio VENTURI (1929-2025)
Italy midfielder who played almost every game for Roma between 1948 and 1957, and scored one goal in six games for the *Azzurri* between 1951 and 1953. Later an assistant coach at Inter where one of his most successful protégés was 1982 World Cup-winning defender Giuseppe Bergomi.

Words by Keir Radnedge, Mark Gleeson and Jamie Evans

"The government has decided to dissolve the coaching staff, suspend the national team until further notice, and exclude players Bruno Ecuele Manga and Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang"

Gabon's sports minister Simplice-Desire Mamboula takes drastic action after the nation's group-stage exit from AFCON

12 MOVES *you might have missed...*

TRANSFERS ★ LOANS ★ SACKINGS ★ HIRINGS ★ SWITCHES ★ RETIREMENTS

Miroslav KOUBEK

After the firing of Ivan Hasek in October, **Czech Republic** hired the 74-year-old former Viktoria Plzen coach to lead them into March's World Cup qualifying play-offs.

John HERDMAN

Indonesia appointed the English coach to replace Patrick Kluivert, who was sacked in October. Herdman, 50, led Canada to the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

Brendan RODGERS

The former Celtic manager joined Saudi Pro League side **Al Qadsiah**, where he will work with the likes of Italy striker Mateo Retegui and former Spain defender Nacho.

Jimmy THELIN

Aberdeen sacked their manager after a poor start to the season. The Swedish coach started well, winning last season's Scottish Cup, but left with the Dons in eighth.

Claude PUEL

Nice turned to their former head coach after a mediocre start to the campaign under Franck Haise. Puel led the Eagles for four years before joining Southampton in 2016.

Pellegrino MATARAZZO

Real Sociedad hired the American to replace Sergio Francisco as their head coach with the team lying in 15th place in La Liga. Matarazzo's last role was with Hoffenheim.

Nicky HAYEN

Less then 18 months after winning the Belgian title, Hayen was fired by **Club Brugge** in December. He wasn't out of work for long though, joining **Genk** just two weeks later.

Dejan STANKOVIC

With **Red Star Belgrade** in danger of missing out on the Serbian title for the first time since 2017, they re-hired the man that won three leagues between 2020 and 2022.

Martin ANSELMI

After failing at Porto last season, the Argentine coach returned to South America with **Botafogo**, who were Brazilian and continental champions in 2024 but struggled last year.

Rui PATRICIO

Portugal's Euro 2016-winning goalkeeper hung up his gloves. The ex-Sporting, Wolves and Roma man's last action came for Al Ain in last summer's Club World Cup.

Thiago SILVA

The former PSG centre-back joined **Porto** from Fluminense. Silva, 41, spent 18 months with his boyhood club, but has returned to Europe to try to make Brazil's World Cup squad.

Takehiro TOMIYASU

The former Arsenal defender joined **Ajax** as a free agent six months after being released by the Gunners.

(Next month's issue will have a full round-up of the transfer window)

"Kevin was recently admitted to hospital for further evaluation of ongoing abdominal symptoms. These investigations have revealed a diagnosis of cancer, for which Kevin will undergo treatment"

The football world wishes Kevin Keegan a full and speedy recovery after a statement from his family revealed the former England manager has been diagnosed with cancer

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

DECEMBER 2025

SEASON RANKINGS
Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

David Raya (Arsenal)	16
Mike Maignan (Milan)	4
Gianluigi Donnarumma (Man City)	3
Mile Svilar (Roma)	3
Gregor Kobel (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Alisson (Liverpool)	1
Lucas Chevalier (PSG)	1
Thibaut Courtois (Real Madrid)	1
Joan Garcia (Barcelona)	1
Peter Gulacsi (RB Leipzig)	1
Dean Henderson (Crystal Palace)	1
Luiz Junior (Villarreal)	1
Emiliano Martinez (Aston Villa)	1
Manuel Neuer (Bayern Munich)	1
Geronimo Rulli (Marseille)	1
Matvey Safonov (PSG)	1
Yann Sommer (Internazionale)	1

DEFENDERS

Gabriel (Arsenal)	15
Nuno Mendes (PSG)	11
Jules Kounde (Barcelona)	9
Konrad Laimer (Bayern Munich)	8
Virgil van Dijk (Liverpool)	8
Achraf Hakimi (PSG)	7
Jurrien Timber (Arsenal)	7
Alex Grimaldo (Bayer Leverkusen)	6
William Saliba (Arsenal)	6
Alessandro Bastoni (Internazionale)	4
Marc Guehi (Crystal Palace)	4
Manuel Akanji (Internazionale)	3
Riccardo Calafiori (Arsenal)	3
Marc Cucurella (Chelsea)	3
Jose Maria Gimenez (Atletico Madrid)	3
Gianluca Mancini (Roma)	3
Eder Militao (Real Madrid)	3
Ruben Dias (Manchester City)	2
Denzel Dumfries (Internazionale)	2
Josko Gvardiol (Manchester City)	2
Piero Hincapie (Arsenal)	2
Matheus Nunes (Manchester City)	2
Nico O'Reilly (Manchester City)	2
Benjamin Pavard (Marseille)	2
Nico Schlotterbeck (B. Dortmund)	2
Josip Stanisic (Bayern Munich)	2
Jonathan Tah (Bayern Munich)	2
Dayot Upamecano (Bayern Munich)	2
Illia Zabarnyi (PSG)	2
Nayef Aguerd (Marseille)	1
Jan Bednarek (Porto)	1
Alvaro Carreras (Real Madrid)	1
Matty Cash (Aston Villa)	1
Zeki Celik (Roma)	1
Pau Cubarsi (Barcelona)	1
Sergino Dest (PSV)	1
Wesley Fofana (Chelsea)	1
Matteo Gabbia (Milan)	1
Eric Garcia (Barcelona)	1
David Hancko (Atletico Madrid)	1
Ferdi Kadioglu (Brighton)	1
Jakub Kiwior (Porto)	1
Robin Le Normand (Atletico Madrid)	1
Myles Lewis-Skelly (Arsenal)	1
Jhon Lucumi (Bologna)	1
Harry Maguire (Manchester United)	1
Marquinhos (PSG)	1
Willian Pacho (PSG)	1
Strahinja Pavlovic (Milan)	1
Malick Thiaw (Newcastle United)	1
Micky van de Ven (Tottenham Hotspur)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Vitinha (PSG)	12
Michael Olise (Bayern Munich)	11
Declan Rice (Arsenal)	11
Jude Bellingham (Real Madrid)	6
Lennart Karl (Bayern Munich)	6
Luka Modric (Milan)	6
Pedri (Barcelona)	6
Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich)	5
Christian Pulisic (Milan)	5
Rayan Cherki (Manchester City)	4
Phil Foden (Manchester City)	4
Arda Guler (Real Madrid)	4
Martin Zubimendi (Arsenal)	4
Eberechi Eze (Arsenal)	3
Scott McTominay (Napoli)	3
Tijjani Reijnders (Manchester City)	3
Christoph Baumgartner (RB Leipzig)	2
Enzo Fernandez (Chelsea)	2
Ryan Gravenberch (Liverpool)	2
Fermin Lopez (Barcelona)	2
Mikel Merino (Arsenal)	2
Joao Neves (PSG)	2
Felix Nmecha (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Martin Odegaard (Arsenal)	2
Nico Paz (Como)	2
Morgan Rogers (Aston Villa)	2
Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa (Napoli)	2

Nicolo Barella (Internazionale)	1
Pablo Barrios (Atletico Madrid)	1
Moises Caicedo (Chelsea)	1
Hakan Calhanoglu (Internazionale)	1
Kevin De Bruyne (Napoli)	1
Nathan De Cat (Anderlecht)	1
Bruno Fernandes (Manchester United)	1
Richard Rios (Benfica)	1
Alexis Saelemakers (Milan)	1
Ismael Saibari (PSV)	1
Matias Soule (Roma)	1
Dominik Szoboszlai (Liverpool)	1
Florian Thauvin (Lens)	1

FORWARDS

Kylian Mbappe (Real Madrid)	32
Harry Kane (Bayern Munich)	29
Erling Haaland (Manchester City)	24
Lautaro Martinez (Internazionale)	4
Luis Diaz (Bayern Munich)	3
Raphinha (Barcelona)	3
Lamine Yamal (Barcelona)	3
Julian Alvarez (Atletico Madrid)	2
David Neres (Napoli)	2
Antoine Semenyo (Bournemouth)	2
Kenan Yildiz (Juventus)	2
Karim Adeyemi (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Yan Diomande (RB Leipzig)	1
Desire Doue (PSG)	1
Estevao (Chelsea)	1
Rasmus Hojlund (Napoli)	1
Robert Lewandowski (Barcelona)	1
Bryan Mbeumo (Manchester United)	1
Troy Parrott (AZ)	1
Marcus Rashford (Barcelona)	1
Bukayo Saka (Arsenal)	1
Igor Thiago (Brentford)	1
Ferran Torres (Barcelona)	1
Deniz Undav (Stuttgart)	1
Can Uzun (Eintracht Frankfurt)	1
Ollie Watkins (Aston Villa)	1

ESM MEMBERS: *A Bola* (Portugal), *Fanatik* (Turkey), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany), *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (Italy), *Kicker* (Germany), *Marca* (Spain), *Nemzeti Sport* (Hungary), *De Telegraaf* (Netherlands), *Tipsbladet* (Denmark), *ELF Voetbal* (Netherlands), *World Soccer* (England)

"Santos is my place, I'm at home. It's with you that I want to achieve the dreams that are still missing"

Brazil all-time record goalscorer Neymar after extending his contract with Santos until the end of 2026

The month in numbers

The facts and stats that have caught our eye in the world of football this month...

47
Goals scored in 2025 by Kevin Hernandez of Puerto Rico Surf – no player scored more top-flight goals across the calendar year.

11%
Growth of attendances in the League of Ireland during 2025 compared to the previous season.

1
Year contract extension that Luis Suarez signed at Inter Miami, keeping the Uruguayan at the MLS champions for the 2026 season.

59
People injured at the Colombian Cup final after violence erupted following Atletico Nacional's 1-0 win over local rivals Deportivo Independiente Medellin.

Violent scenes...the Colombian Cup final

2032
Year that Liam Rosenior's deal runs to as Chelsea head coach after he replaced Enzo Maresca. Strasbourg, who Rosenior left, swiftly installed Gary O'Neil as his replacement.

8
Games that Wilfried Nancy led Celtic, the shortest managerial reign of any permanent appointment in the Scottish club's history.

6
Trophies won in 2025 by PSG after they beat Flamengo to win the FIFA Intercontinental Cup (more on page 74).

FIFA Arab Cup winners...Morocco lift the trophy

2
FIFA Arab Cups won by Morocco after they defeated Jordan 3-2 in the 2025 final, which took place just before the AFCON finals (more on page 88).

31.9%
Ruben Amorim's win ratio at Manchester United, the worst record of any permanent boss at Old Trafford.

59
Age that Kazuyoshi Miura will turn in February as the eternal Japanese striker embarks on his latest move, a loan deal at Japanese third-tier side Fukushima United.

2
World Cup countries that have been added to the United States' travel ban list, with Ivory Coast and Senegal joining Iran and Haiti on the 39-country list.

2027
Year that Flamengo manager Filipe Luis will remain in Rio after signing a new contract with the South American champions.

$60
Price of FIFA's "affordable tickets" for 2026 World Cup matches (£45), which were introduced following criticism of the cost of attending this summer's finals.

13
Number of different kick-off times that will be in operation at this summer's World Cup, ranging between 5pm and 5am (BST).

3
Length of time in minutes that hydration breaks will last during each half of every 2026 World Cup game in North America.

59
Goals that Kylian Mbappe scored in all competitions for Real Madrid in 2025, matching the club record held by Cristiano Ronaldo.

Equalling Ronaldo's record... Mbappe copies CR7's celebration

50%
Increase on prize money for the 2026 World Cup, with the winners now set to receive $50m, while even teams that exit at the group stage will collect $9m.

6
Goals scored by Glentoran forward Patrick Hoban in just 52 minutes during his side's 7-0 win v Carrick Rangers in the NIFL Premiership.

1
Players to have scored a century of goals for Manchester City's women, after Khadija Shaw notched her 100th goal in a WSL clash with Aston Villa (more on page 71).

262
Appearances that Pascal Gross made for Brighton during his first spell at the club, before returning to the Seagulls from Borussia Dortmund in January.

Back at Brighton... Pascal Gross

76
Games that it took for Harry Kane to score ten Bundesliga hat-tricks, quicker than any other player. The previous record holder, Robert Lewandowski, took 324 games to reach the milestone.

277
Mo Salah's combined tally of Premier League goals and assists for Liverpool. No player has contributed as many for a single club in the competition.

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Jesse Lingard

Former England and Manchester United attacking midfielder's time in South Korea comes to an end

It was fitting that Jesse Lingard scored in his final game for FC Seoul in December, and perhaps also fitting that the team could not hold on for the win in that game against Melbourne City in their AFC Champions League Elite clash. In his two seasons, he impressed on and off the pitch, but the team flattered to deceive and while he won hearts and minds, it was a trophyless spell.

Overall though, the former England, Manchester United, West Ham United and Nottingham Forest star can be proud of his time in South Korea.

The 33-year-old surprised many by heading to the K-League back in February 2024. China, Japan and now Saudi Arabia have all had their moments with famous foreign players but Asia's oldest professional league, despite conglomerate backing from the likes of Hyundai, Samsung and LG, had never gone down that route.

The early headlines, however, weren't great – and not just because he was fined after a few months for riding an e-scooter without a licence and a helmet. There were some strong words from Seoul coach Kim Gi-dong calling for more effort from the star: "He only played a few minutes, and yet he didn't work hard and avoided tussle," said Kim after Lingard's third game for the club. "Fame doesn't win football games. If it did, I would have brought in a famous retired player."

His attitude was never questioned again, though, as the player started to show what he could do and ended up being made club captain. The K-League is not the easiest division to score in – coaches tend to be conservative and safety-first – but Lingard managed six goals in 26 games in his first season, then followed it up with ten in 34 in 2025. The major downside was that Seoul never really challenged for the league title, finishing fourth (out of 12 teams) in his first season and then sixth the following campaign.

FC Seoul said in a statement that Lingard had lifted the international profile of both league and club and officials claim there were higher audiences for games broadcast at home and abroad, though this is all relative. The star uses social media well and there were some viral moments that went around the world, with the UK media reporting on his goings-on from time to time. Seoul's average attendance jumped from 22,000 to 28,000 in his first season – over 50,000 turned out for his first home game – though there was a slight dip in 2025.

Fond farewell ...Lingard says goodbye to the Seoul supporters

But as well as the goals, the myriad of celebrations and social media posts, fans appreciated the player's obvious respect for Korean culture. Perhaps his biggest legacy will be his goodbye to-do list. A well-known international player giving some constructive criticism from his own personal experience was well received and he implored his hosts to improve playing surfaces as well as training and clubhouse facilities.

> "He generated an extraordinary level of public attention and emerged as a symbolic figure not only for the club but for the entire K-League"
>
> **FC Seoul club statement on Jesse Lingard**

He reserved his greatest criticism for the standard of officiating. "I'm not a player who usually has problems with referees," he noted. "But there were games where it felt like emotions were being provoked on purpose. Sometimes it was very hard to control your feelings because of how the match was managed."

Many agree with his comments, including Gus Poyet, the league's other high-profile foreign name. The Uruguayan coach also left in December after leading Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors to a league and cup double, and did not have much positive to say about the referees.

In the end, though, the overriding emotion in Seoul as Lingard left was not anger. It was a tearful goodbye on both sides. "It's been a good two years for me. I've learned a lot," he said. "This year I had a lot of responsibility as captain, so I believe I can leave South Korea as a more mature player and person."

John Duerden

Serie A

Plans to take an Italian top-flight fixture abroad are shelved – for now

Serie A may revisit the idea of taking games abroad despite pulling out of plans to play a league match in Australia.

Recognising its potential for promoting the competition's global brand, Lega Serie A, the organisation that runs the Italian top flight, believes that the cancellation of the fixture in Perth between Milan and Como has been "a missed opportunity" for Italian football.

The two clubs were provisionally scheduled to meet at the Optus Stadium on February 8. Were it to have gone ahead, it would have been the first time that any of Europe's major leagues had staged a domestic league game in a different country.

With Milan's San Siro stadium hosting the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics on that weekend, Lega Serie A, in tandem with the Government of Western Australia, had spent months lobbying football's governing bodies for permission to transfer the match to Perth.

Milan have a two million-strong fanbase in Australia and the city has a large population of Italian descent. In May 2024, an exhibition game between Milan and Roma at the Optus Stadium drew a near sell-out 56,000 crowd.

While it had the backing of all 20 Serie A clubs, the idea had its critics in Italy. Massimiliano Allegri and Cesc Fabregas, the head coaches of the two teams concerned, were not in favour. Adrien Rabiot, Milan's French international midfielder, called the prospect of the 17,000-mile round trip in mid-season "absurd".

The dissent was less widespread than in Spain, however, where a similar move to take a La Liga fixture between Villarreal and Barcelona to the United States was halted after players stood still during the first few seconds of matches in protest.

The Italian Football Federation, Football Australia and UEFA – the latter reluctantly – all approved Lega Serie A's proposal. But the green light from the Asian Football Confederation (AFC), of which Australia is a member, came with stringent conditions.

San Siro...Milan will host Como at their famous home ground

The Italian league agreed to its request to appoint AFC-accredited match officials. But the AFC also insisted that the game could not be organised, marketed or advertised as a Serie A fixture and threatened to fine the Australian federation in the event of any breach. The deal collapsed when Lega Serie A refused to provide indemnities for the financial risk involved.

> "This conclusion represents a missed opportunity in the growth of Italian football internationally"
>
> **Lega Serie A president Ezio Simonelli**

By that stage, logistics were also becoming a factor. The deadline was imminent to transport the VAR and goal-line technology to Western Australia in time.

The game will now be played at the San Siro at a later date.

"We remain firmly convinced that this conclusion represents a missed opportunity in the growth of Italian football internationally," said Lega Serie A president Ezio Simonelli. "It also deprives the many Serie A fans abroad of the dream of watching their favorite team play live."

While the idea stemmed from the unavailability of the San Siro, Lega Serie A, conscious of the financial gulf between itself and the Premier League, has made no secret of its readiness to export fixtures to generate more revenue.

"We need international markets," chief executive officer Luigi De Siervo told *SportMediaset* in December. "All the major leagues will play at least one match abroad in the coming years. American sports have been doing it for some time.

"We are talking about a small sacrifice to look for new spectators and to stay among the top four leagues in the world."

Historically, Italian football has been at the forefront of taking matches abroad. Since 1993, the Supercoppa Italiana has been hosted by several different countries. This season's edition, won by Napoli in December, was the fourth in a row to be held in Saudi Arabia.

Greg Whelan

eye witness

Mike Tuckerman reports

AUSTRALIA

South Melbourne's new horizons

The Australian club are at the heart of two ground-breaking competitions

One of Australian football's most famous clubs is back in the national spotlight after rising to the forefront of two new ground-breaking competitions for the region. In December, South Melbourne claimed the inaugural edition of the Australian Championship and then in January began a new campaign in the first edition of the OFC Pro League.

The Australian Championship is organised by Football Australia and was originally intended to be a new nationwide second tier below the A-League.

The competition format is a group stage followed by knockout rounds with 16 teams involved: the eight winners from the state-based National Premier Leagues (NPL) across the country, plus eight "foundation" clubs who will take part every year, of which South Melbourne is one.

The club, which was founded as South Melbourne Hellas by Greek migrants in 1959, claimed the inaugural title in convincing fashion after topping a tough group containing Sydney Olympic. Both sides were once heavyweights in the old National Soccer League (NSL), the top flight of Australian football before the advent of the A-League. With both clubs sharing a similar foundation story, there was plenty of history to their meeting at the start of the competition in early October. In the latest instalment of the "Greek Derby", South Melbourne downed Sydney Olympic 3-2, starting the six-week competition as they meant to finish.

By the time the group stage wrapped up a month later, Sinisa Cohadzic's men were looking down from atop Group A with a record of five wins and one draw.

Cohadzic only took charge in April 2025, replacing long-serving Argentine coach Esteban Quintas. But the Serbian-born tactician, who applied for close to 100 head coaching roles before finally being handed the reins at South Melbourne, won over the initial sceptics with a renewed brand of attacking football.

Esteban led South Melbourne to the NPL Victoria premiers crown in 2024, but they failed to qualify for the finals series in 2025 – although this may have ultimately worked in their favour in the Australian Championship. Cohadzic's team looked fresher than several of their opponents, and they put that vitality to good use, dropping their only points in a 3-3 draw with Moreton City Excelsior in Brisbane.

But there were no such complications once South Melbourne booked their spot in the final eight, seeing off Sydney side NWS Spirit 2-0 at Lakeside Stadium. That ensured a mouth-watering semi-final showdown with newly crowned Victorian champions Heidelberg United, a club founded by Greek Macedonian migrants in 1958 and South's long-time rivals.

The two were the standout sides in Victorian state football in 2025. As well as claiming the state league title, the Bergers also made it all the way to the Australia Cup final where they lost 3-1 after extra-time to A-League side Newcastle Jets. But South Melbourne had ▸

Trailblazers... South Melbourne FC

Lakeside Stadium ...home of South Melbourne FC

beaten them in the final of the Dockerty Cup, the state's domestic cup competition, in August and were determined to get one over their crosstown rivals again in front of more than 4,000 spectators at their Lakeside home.

It took a solitary goal from substitute Manny Aguek to settle the contest, with the South Sudan international nodding home with his first touch from a long throw to the far post.

"I actually thought that was our real final," long-standing South Melbourne fan Samuel Jonis tells *World Soccer*.

SHIFTING GROUNDS

When the Australian Championship was launched, Football Australia announced that both the competition's semi-finals and final would be played at neutral venues. But such are the complications of playing football in a country where stadium availability remains a serious problem, South ultimately hosted their semi-final against the Bergers at the stadium they've called home since 1995.

South's move to Lakeside – which takes its name from its position on the northern shores of Albert Park Lake – has not been without its complications.

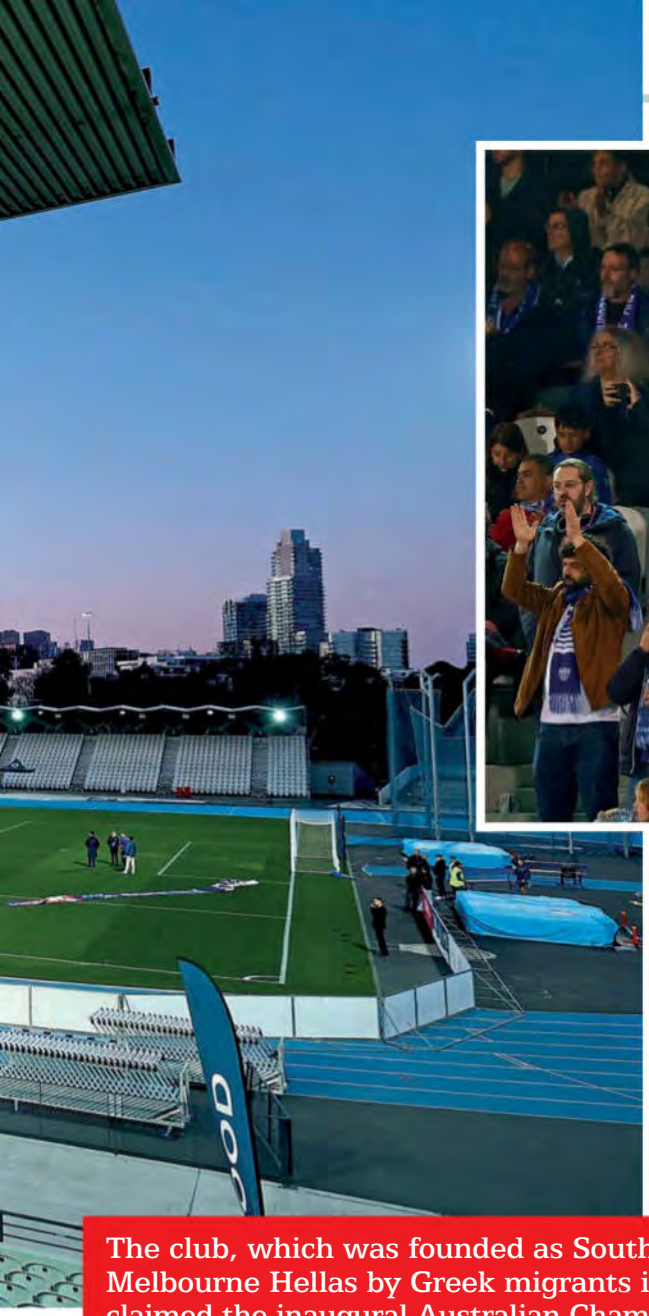
South Melbourne head coach... Sinisa Cohadzic

The club was forced to move to the venue after their previous home ground in nearby Middle Park was demolished to make way for the new home of Australia's Formula One Grand Prix.

While the newly christened Bob Jane Stadium proved a fortress in the NSL days – South claimed back-to-back championships under an up-and-coming Ange Postecoglou in the late 1990s – attendances had dwindled by the time the club found themselves back in the Victorian state league.

Nevertheless, the state government's decision to transform Lakeside Stadium into a shared athletics venue in 2011 was met with dismay by South fans – with a running track installed around the perimeter of the pitch that leaves fans in either of the two grandstands seated a long way from the action.

Lakeside wasn't even available by the time South Melbourne booked their



Greek roots...the club was founded as South Melbourne Hellas by Greek migrants back in 1959

The club, which was founded as South Melbourne Hellas by Greek migrants in 1959, claimed the inaugural Australian Championship title in convincing fashion

spot in the Australian Championship final on December 6 – ironically due to an athletics meet – where they took on another former NSL heavyweight in Sydney side Marconi Stallions.

A crowd of 4,667 ultimately decamped to Olympic Village, home of Heidelberg, to witness the competition decider.

"I know Lakeside has got a running track, but it's still a better ground than Olympic Village," claims Jonis.

Having hosted and beaten Moreton City Excelsior in the other semi-final, Marconi may have felt hard done by to learn the final was to be played in Melbourne. And they had a real mountain to climb once Aguek, now in a starting role, lashed home a superb finish in the 11th minute after latching on to a loose back-pass from Marconi midfielder Franco Meyer. And the nominal hosts doubled their lead nine minutes later through skipper Marko Jankovic, sparking wild celebrations among the thousands of Hellas fans massed in the main grandstand.

There was a moment of controversy in first-half stoppage time when Marconi defender Lachlan Griffiths headed down into the gloves of South Melbourne goalkeeper Javier Diaz Lopez, who momentarily fumbled the ball on the goal-line.

It prompted Marconi coach Peter Tsekenis to use one of his two "video support" cards to review the footage, after Football Australia signed up to trial a new system that allows head coaches to challenge contentious decisions during the game.

The system was introduced by FIFA to support competitions like the Australian Championship with limited broadcast technologies and no use of Video Assistant Referees. Brought in for the knockout phase, each team received two review cards per match – plus an additional card in extra-time – with coaches handing the support card to the fourth official to review contentious decisions on goals, penalties, direct red cards, and mistaken identities around cautions and sending-offs.

But with no clear television angles available to determine whether the ball had actually crossed the line, let alone goal-line technology, South's veteran Spanish keeper breathed a sigh of relief on his way to keeping a third clean sheet in three knockout-round encounters.

Foundation club...the South Melbourne FC board at the announcement of the Australian Championship

OFC PRO LEAGUE

Having added another piece of silverware to the club's well-stocked trophy cabinet, South Melbourne embarked on a new challenge when they were one of eight clubs to kick-off the new OFC Professional League in January.

Ever the trailblazers, the Victorians signed up for the new competition despite it being hosted by a different confederation to the one they currently play in. They haven't been universally acclaimed for doing so, with Vanuatu's national team head coach Moise Poida criticising the involvement of a side from the Asian Football Confederation in Oceania's new club competition.

Poida claimed the Australian club had only entered the OFC Pro League to try to secure a spot in FIFA's lucrative Club World Cup – prompting the Oceania Football Confederation to clarify that if South Melbourne go on to win the competition, that spot will be taken by the runners-up.

South Melbourne co-president Andrew Mesourouni, whose son Andrico came off the bench for the final eight minutes of the Australian Championship final, was more prosaic about his side's involvement in the new Oceania competition.

"I think participating in the OFC Pro League between January and May gives us another perspective of what the club can actually achieve – not only nationally but internationally," Mesourouni told *World Soccer*. "We will also continue to participate in our local league – NPL Victoria – as well as the various cup competitions.

"It gives us a bit more exposure. It brings more commercial opportunities and gives more opportunity to our footballers, who are now virtually turning pro."

Aguek, a one-cap international for South Sudan, has already led the way in that regard, signing a professional contract with Thai League side Swat Cat.

Although South Melbourne remain a semi-professional club plying their trade underneath Australia's fully professional A-League, they will nevertheless start the OFC Pro League as one of the early favourites to take the title.

If South Melbourne go on to win the OFC Professional League, the FIFA Club World Cup spot will be taken by the runners-up

Flying the flag...the club will be Australia's representatives in the 2026 OFC Pro League

Yet for Mesourouni – who was named co-president alongside Bill Papastergiadis in September 2025 – the new competition is already bearing fruit.

"For us now, we've basically become a club that plays football all-year-round and is a business all-year-round," Mesourouni said. "As an NPL club, you're really only remaining a community club. But we're looking at ourselves as a business.

"Our doors are open virtually 12 months of the year – which means we're generating revenue almost 12 months of the year. It makes our survival at Lakeside Stadium a lot easier."

For fans of one of Australia's most passionately supported clubs, the new competition is yet another venture into the unknown.

While the jury is still out on the merits of the Australian Championship – South Melbourne attracted decent

Rematch...South Melbourne faced Auckland FC in the Australia Cup last August

crowds, but other fixtures drew attendances in the hundreds – it has undoubtedly helped one of the traditional heavyweights of Australian football reconnect with their sizeable fan base.

"I'm looking forward to it," said long-time supporter Jonis of the club's action-packed 2026 fixture list. "We've got one of our most exciting years ahead in a long time."

After taking on some of the strongest club sides in Oceania – along with what is essentially A-League side Auckland FC's reserve team – the Victorian outfit will be looking to improve on last season's disappointing ninth-place finish in NPL Victoria.

But it will be how they back up their maiden Australian Championship win in next season's edition that could draw the most interest.

"I haven't been this enthused about an upcoming season in the last ten or 12 years," Jonis said. "Prior to last season, I didn't think we always played the most attractive football. Now I think we've got an opportunity to be not just one of the best teams, but also one of the most watchable."

Turn to page 92 for more on the OFC Pro League

2026 OFC PRO LEAGUE

AUCKLAND FC
Auckland FC compete in Australia's A-League, and their OFC Pro League side is expected to be largely a development XI. Luke Casserly, previously coach of Auckland FC's reserves, and assistant to head coach Steve Corica, will take charge of the team which hosts the first set of matches at its Eden Park home. The prospect of the winners taking the OFC's slot in the 2029 FIFA Club World Cup may have influenced Auckland's owners, the Black Knight multi-club group, which also owns stakes in a host of clubs including English Premier League outfit AFC Bournemouth and Ligue 1's Lorient.

BULA FC
Clubs from Ba and Suva expressed interest, but the Fiji Football Association and the Ministry of Youth and Sports opted to form a new club, Bula, which will operate independently, like the Drua rugby union franchise. The bulk of the squad is aged 18 to 23 with some players from the Fiji side that played in the 2025 Under-17 World Cup in Qatar. Former Guadeloupe international Stephane Auvray will coach Bula and the national side. "It's a really good idea for the region and Fiji," says Auvray. "We have only amateur football here and even if we have talented players, there is always a ceiling, so it will be good for the national team too."

PNG HEKARI
Bougainville, Port Moresby and Lae City showed interest but 2010 OFC Champions League winners Hekari United – now renamed PNG Hekari – will be Papua New Guinea's sole representatives in the Pro League. "I think it's a good idea because it's necessary to professionalise football in Oceania," says Brazilian coach Marcos Gusmao, who will run Hekari. "It's expensive, but if they didn't do it, it might take a long time, or they would stagnate without prospects of appearing on the world football stage. The first objective is to reach the top four and get to the semi-finals. If that happens, I have high hopes of winning the tournament, but we have strong and well-prepared opponents."

SOLOMON KINGS
The Solomon Kings is a joint venture between the Solomon Islands Football Federation and Australian semi-professional outfit Wynnum Wolves, who play in the Queensland Premier League. SIFF president Donald Marahare is the new club's chairman with Rabieh Krayem, former chair of the Association of Australian Football Clubs and Queensland's Northern Fury, the vice-chairman. The Kings will be based in Honiara but also train at Carmichael Park in Wynnum near Brisbane. The set-up also offers the intriguing prospect of successful players potentially being picked up by Borussia Dortmund as the Bundesliga giants signed a partnership deal with the Wolves in February 2025.

SOUTH ISLAND UNITED
Spun out of Dettol Southern League side Christchurch United, which is backed by Russian businessman Viatcheslav "Slava" Meyn, who moved to the city in 2009. Former Fiji coach Rob Sherman has joined as manager and says: "We've recruited across New Zealand and from overseas. [Players] can go back to their original clubs after the league ends but during the season they can only play for South Island. We have three overseas players but no Pacific players. I did approach a couple of my Fiji squad, but they had a better offer from their home nation team."

TAHITI UNITED
Existing local side AS Venus from Mahina, winners of Tahiti's top flight on 11 occasions and nine-times cup winners, was chosen ahead of bids from AS Pirae and AS Tefana by the Tahitian Football Federation and the French territory's local government. The aim of the new team is to provide a club side that can unite all Tahitians, and former national team defender Samuel Garcia, who has been Tahiti's coach since 2019, will take on the same role with the new side.

VANUATU UNITED
Local side Vanuatu FC, which plays in the island's professional league, has rebranded as Vanuatu United with a new nickname, The Chiefs. Three overseas and Pacific players have been recruited and German coach Lars Hopp will also run the national XI. "The attraction is obviously to build something from scratch, with good people in a nice place," says Hopp. "I'm sure the OFC Pro League will be a big benefit to the region, hopefully establishing solid professional structures in each participating country and for the long term. I guess, especially in the beginning, there can be a few bumps in the road, but in the long term I'm sure the league will have a positive impact."

Profiles compiled by Steve Menary

eye witness

Steve Menary reports

FINLAND

The rise, fall and rise of Tampere United

Getting out of the lower reaches of Finnish football is not easy, even for clubs with a recent stellar history like Tampere United.

United are one of three clubs in Tampere, Finland's third-biggest city, located some 111 miles north of the capital, Helsinki. Tampereen Ilves, the best supported of the three, play in the top flight, while Tampereen Pallo-Veikot (TPV) spent last season in the fourth tier, but both have been around since the 1930s. Tampere United were only formed in 1998 but enjoyed a stellar run with forays into Europe, before crashing spectacularly.

The club had an immediate impact on Finnish football, winning promotion to the top-tier Veikkausliiga within 15 months and finishing sixth in 2000. A year later, Tampere United were champions, and they repeated the feat in 2006 and 2007. Only 33-time record champions HJK Helsinki have won more Finnish titles this century.

The club played in European competitions on eight occasions and won through two qualifying stages of the Champions League in 2007-08. In 2009 they reached the final of both the Finnish Cup and the League Cup, winning the latter, but that proved to be the end of their peak years.

After an 11th successive season in the Veikkausliiga, the club began to unravel amid mounting financial issues. Supporters rallied round and formed a trust to buy shares in the club but, in 2011, Tampere United were expelled from the Finnish league for receiving funds from Singaporean firm Exclusive Sport Pte Ltd.

The company were found to have given the club money in return for giving certain players places on the team, but Exclusive Sport was a front for Wilson Raj Perumal. In 2011, Perumal was handed a two-year jail sentence by a Finnish court for bribing players and referees to fix matches, and admitted the funds given to Tampere United came from match-fixing. Two years later, the Turku Court of Appeal found two of Tampere United's former directors guilty of money laundering.

Amidst all this chaos, the club could have disappeared. But the supporters' trust founded a rival club, TamU-K, and in 2012 they entered the bottom level of the Finnish pyramid and enjoyed a rapid rise up the Finnish league system.

By 2016, TamU-K had won three league titles in four seasons and were promoted out of regional football and into the third tier. The rump of the old club, Tampere United FC, which had been inactive, then agreed with the supporters' trust to merge with TamU-K. Heikki Wilen, the chairman of the Tampere United Supporters' Association, was elected chairman of the re-born

BELOW: Rising again... inside Tampere United's Tammelan Stadion
Photo credit: Nea Ojala

Fan connection...supporters saved the club from going out of business *Photo credit: Nea Ojala*

Tampere United, replacing Jyrki Laiho.

Since then, the club has bounced between the third and fourth tiers, with managers coming and going. At the end of 2024, after winning promotion back up to the third division, they decided that something different was required.

There are not many qualified coaches with a background quite like Sebastian Bowles, who was hired ahead of the 2025 season. Growing up in Finland to a Finnish mother and a British father who left the UK after an injury wrecked his nascent football career, Bowles spent his 20s not playing football but playing in a glam rock band called Parasite City.

After a decade of touring took its toll, Bowles began playing and then coaching football in Finland. He gained his UEFA B badge as a youth coach at Haka then his UEFA A licence through the Scottish Football Association, before coaching at Ytterhogdal in Sweden and even spending a season with Luawa FC in the Sierra Leone Premier League.

Armed with a CV that few other head coaches could produce, Bowles returned from Africa to Finland and the Tampere United job.

He was not the only new face at the club. A complete overhaul of the playing staff saw 15 of the players from the promotion-winning squad depart.

"All due respect to the players that got us promoted, but we wanted to compete," Bowles tells *World Soccer* over a coffee in the Stockman cafe in downtown Tampere. "This isn't junior football, and we had to be ruthless."

Open trials were announced. After 100 applications, 25 players were invited to train with the club, and in December 2024 a dozen were signed. But money is scarce at this level, particularly for a fan-owned club looking to avoid the mistakes of the past – even one with crowds of over 1,000, making them the league's best-supported club.

All the new players were recruited on one-year deals with wages of no more than €200-a-month, plus bonuses. "It's heavily bonus incentivised," says Bowles.

Still, he succeeded in bonding an entirely new starting XI, and performed well before running out of steam.

"We were only promoted the season before and made the promotion group so that was a big achievement, but for the club to get promotion they need to invest," says Bowles.

Following a board change, the club decided not to continue into 2026 with Bowles. He was allowed to see out the season, given a hero's send-off in his final home game, and has since moved across the city to take charge of TPV on their return to the third tier.

As for Tampere United, the path back up the Finnish pyramid will remain a struggle. But at least they still have a club.

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Football's 50 WONDERKIDS

Nick Bidwell, Tim Vickery, James Nalton, John Duerden and Mark Gleeson identify 50 top young talents from across the globe who are ready to make a name for themselves in 2026

Honest AHANOR

Atalanta (Ita)
Age: 17
Centre-back

If Italy head coach Gennaro Gattuso had his way the Atalanta defender, who has settled in excellently following a €20 million summer move from Genoa, would already be in the *Azzurri* squad.

Gattuso, swift to anoint the teenager as "national team material", is an admirer of Ahanor's muscular presence, solid technique and temperament for the big occasion, a coolness he has displayed of late in the UEFA Champions League. But despite the fact that Ahanor was born in Aversa, north of Naples, and has always lived in the country, the fact that his parents are Nigerian means he cannot be considered for Italian citizenship until he is 18.

The Italian federation will be hoping to break the bureaucratic logjam as quickly as possible. If the naturalisation process should fail, Nigeria are ready to pounce.

It seems problematic that it's easier for an "*Oriundi*" (a South American player with Italian ancestry) like Mateo Retegui to qualify for Italy than the likes of Ahanor, a 100 per cent product of the football system in the peninsula.

Ahanor, who earned a place in the Genoa academy at the age of five, went on to successfully rise through the club's ranks, playing a key role as the club clinched the national Under-18 title in 2023-24 and making his first-team breakthrough the following season (in a top-flight encounter with Juventus in September 2024). At just 16 years, seven months and five days, he was the first 2008-born player to appear in Serie A.

Also capable of shining as a left-sided full-back or wing-back, Ahanor has been hot property for quite some time, reportedly on the radar of the likes of Chelsea, Milan, Juventus, Roma and Ligue 1 outfit Monaco. That he ultimately chose to put pen to paper for Atalanta speaks volumes about the Bergamo club's well-earned reputation for unlocking potential and placing their faith in young talent.

In an Atalanta side which often has struggled to come to terms with the shock departure to Roma of long-serving head coach Gian Piero Gasperini, the youngster has more than lived up to his price-tag, catching the eye with his athleticism, explosive power and sense of anticipation. Not surprising for one so young, the odd flaw has come to light and he was definitely off the pace when Atalanta recently fell to a 3-1 defeat against reigning champions Napoli, much less disciplined than usual and caught napping on more than one occasion. A harsh lesson indeed, but one the talented tyro undoubtedly will bounce back from.

Hamza ABDELKARIM

Al Ahly (Egy)
Age: 18
Forward

The quick-footed teenager, who turned 18 on New Year's day, is the latest sensation off the production line at Al Ahly. In 2025 he became the club's youngest player of the century and scored goals for Egypt at both the Under-17 Africa Cup of Nations and Under-17 World Cup. Could be set for a move to Europe in 2026, with Barcelona said to be watching him.

Al Qadsiah (KSA)
Age: 22
Midfielder

The cultured midfielder, who has an eye for a goal, left Al Hilal in August to sign for the ambitious Al Qadsiah. It was quite a coup given that he has already established himself as a Saudi Arabia international, scoring six goals in 30 appearances for the national team.

Musab AL JUWAYR

Palmeiras (Bra)
Age: 21
Attacking midfielder

Lithe, quick, left-footed attacking midfielder, who is usually employed on the right. He was overshadowed by the sheer quantity of youth products, including Estevao Willian, at his club but finished 2025 strongly after forcing his way into the first team during the Club World Cup in the US.

ALLAN

Ramiro ARCIGA

Tijuana (Mex)
Age: 21
Winger
Arciga is one of many young Mexicans pushing for national team recognition ahead of the World Cup. He has only one cap to his name so far, which came in a friendly against Bolivia in the summer of 2024 while he was with first club Mazatlan, but since joining Tijuana at the start of 2025 he has been one of the most creative players on the continent on the right wing.

Keny ARROYO

Cruzeiro (Bra)
Age: 19
Winger
Quick, aggressive left-footed winger who was Independiente del Valle's star revelation of 2024. Spent a few months with Besiktas in Turkey, and has hit the ground running since a mid-year move to Brazil. With Ecuador desperate for goals, he has an excellent chance of going to the World Cup.

Youri BAAS

Ajax (Ned)
Age: 22
Centre-back
The left-sided defender has been improving at a remarkable lick of late, one of the rare positive notes in a season of crisis at the Amsterdam club. Baas has been one of the first names on the team-sheet – which is particularly impressive given that Ajax were ready to offload him a couple of years ago.

Said EL MALA

Cologne (Ger)
Age: 19
Winger
The word "ubiquitous" immediately springs to mind when it comes to El Mala who, barely into his Bundesliga career, has almost instantaneously become a nationwide centre of attention.

German sportswriters, enthralled by his wondrous ability on the ball, facility for the spectacular and incisiveness when cutting inside from the left flank, simply cannot get enough of him. Whether it's in blow-by-blow accounts of his brilliant goals against Hoffenheim and Augsburg, rumours of big-name suitors such as Bayern Munich, Borussia Dortmund and Manchester City, or coverage of his first call-up to the Germany squad in November, El Mala's name is everywhere.

Bundestrainer Julian Nagelsmann very much liked what he saw from the youngster during a number of training sessions prior to World Cup qualifiers against Luxembourg and Slovakia, but ultimately opted to keep the boy wonder under wraps. El Mala stayed on the bench for the Luxembourg fixture and then went back to the Under-21 fold for an important European Championship qualifier in Georgia.

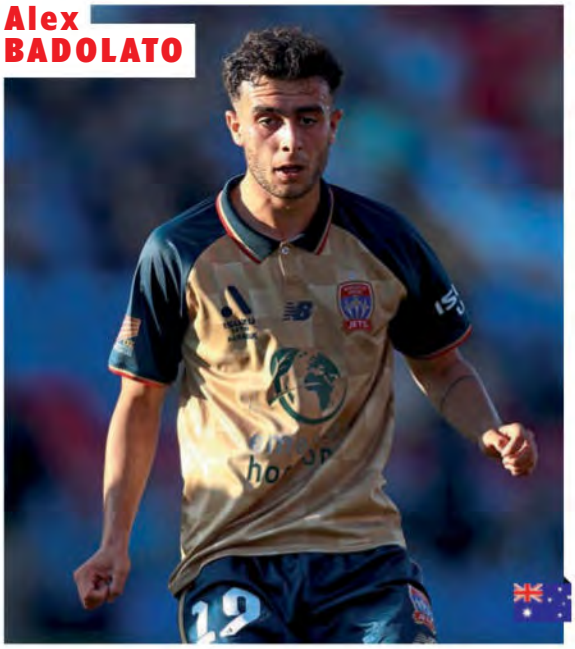
"It was Said's first time with us and he did well," said Nagelsmann, anxious not to frame his decision as a brush-off. "He made a good impression. He's a great young man. He proved he has the soft-skills. He's humble enough and has enough cheek in him too. He has to nail down an automatic spot for Cologne and has to work on the parts of his game which [Cologne coach] Lukas Kwasniok has pointed out to him. If he does that, he can make an impact with the *Nationalmannschaft*."

Nagelsmann was probably correct to add a shot of reality to all the hype – El Mala still has plenty to learn. Just a few months ago he was playing in the third tier for Viktoria Cologne, and most of his Bundesliga minutes have come as a second-half substitute.

In a recent 3-1 loss to Borussia Monchengladbach in a Rhineland derby, Kwasniok was so unhappy with his lack of application in off-the-ball duties that he hooked him at half-time. "He was not good," explained the coach. "That's why I took him off. It's as simple as that. Out of possession, he didn't do as instructed on more than one occasion."

His Germany U21 coach Antonio Di Salvo also sees him as a work in progress, advising the young winger to vary his game, to beat full-backs on the outside from time to time rather than always heading straight for goal. "His finishing needs to be more precise as well," added Di Salvo. Tough love in search of perfection.

Alex BADOLATO



Newcastle Jets (Aus)
Age: 20
Attacking midfielder
The first Australian to be named the AFC's Young Player of the Year, winning ahead of Hamed Yousef of Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan's Sadriddin Khasanov. That was recognition for an excellent 2025 for the midfielder who was named MVP in leading Australia to victory at the Under-20 Asian Cup, though he will miss a big chunk of 2026 after rupturing his ACL.

Velez Sarsfield (Arg)
Age: 19
Forward
Jerky left-footed forward, normally used cutting in from the right wing. With Velez losing players to sales and injuries, responsibility was thrust upon him early, but he has consistently risen to the challenge. On target three times at the 2025 Under-20 World Cup in Chile.

Maher CARRIZO

Nathan DE CAT

Anderlecht (Bel)
Age: 17
Midfielder
A guarantee of elegance and productivity in all areas of midfield. Equally effective striking long accurate balls as pulling inventive moves out of the hat in and around the opposition box. Bayern Munich are one of many leading European clubs on his case.

Boca Juniors (Arg)
Age: 20
Midfielder
Central midfielder who started to gain first-team experience in 2024 and has more recently been operating well alongside the experience of World Cup winner Leandro Paredes. A little man with a big presence, winning the ball and linking the play. Simply outstanding during Argentina's run to the U20 World Cup final.

Milton DELGADO

Emmanuel EMEGHA

Strasbourg (Fra)
Age: 22
Forward
A hard-working goal-scorer who started the season in scintillating form and made his Netherlands debut in November. However, he's fallen out with Strasbourg's fans since agreeing to join Chelsea this summer and was recently given a one-match ban by his club for disciplinary reasons.

Max DOWMAN

Arsenal (Eng)
Age: 16
Attacking midfielder
Poetry in motion attacking ball-carrier, who this season became the youngest-ever player to appear in the UEFA Champions League, coming off the bench for the last 20 minutes of the Gunners' 3-0 away victory at Slavia Prague. Has risen meteorically, playing for Arsenal's Under-18s when he was only 13 years old, but will miss the first two months of 2026 after picking up an ankle injury while on duty for the club's Under-21s.

Karl ETTA EYONG

Levante (Spa)
Age: 22
Forward

Talk about a meteoric rise. As recently as 2024, the Cameroon international was to be found in the relative anonymity of the Spanish fourth tier, netting regularly for the Cadiz B team. Fast forward 18 months – via a prolific stint with Villarreal B – and his life has been totally transformed, now regarded as one of the best front-men in La Liga and attracting interest from a host of top clubs, including Barcelona and Real Madrid, plus several elite Premier League outfits. They will likely have to meet his release clause: €30m for Spanish buyers, €40m for overseas.

A few months ago, Levante reportedly turned down €30m from top Russian club CSKA Moscow and in an interview with *GiveMeSport* in November, the 22-year-old Cameroonian outlined the broad strokes of his future plans: "I can't pick between La Liga and the Premier League because I love both leagues. I have already achieved my dream of playing in La Liga and my other dream is to one day play in the Premier League."

Etta Eyong, who left his native Cameroon for Cadiz in southern Spain at the age of 19 in 2022, certainly has the attributes to prosper in the English top flight: beast-like physicality, speed and directness, the ability to hold the ball up with his back to goal, and strong in the air. But by no means is he an uncomplicated spearhead of old. A midfielder in the early part of his career, he is stealthy and sharp in the box, extremely mobile, clever in his movement between the lines – especially strong when working the right-wing channel – and boasts much more tactical maturity than he is often given credit for. Any club in need of a frontrunner who can stretch defences will find Etta Eyong just what the doctor ordered.

All the rumours of an impending big-money move stand in stark contrast to the modest fees he has commanded up to now. Villarreal only paid Cadiz €1.5m for him in August 2024, with the former then selling him to Levante last summer for a mere €3m.

Villarreal's cheat code in the deal is that they retain an eminently affordable buy-back clause. So at the end of the season, they will either bring him back for a reduced amount and immediately put him to work or cash-in for a hefty profit. Canny operators, they are in win-win territory.

Olger ESCOBAR

Montreal (Can)
Age: 19
Forward

Won the Best Young Player award ahead of Gilberto Mora (page 42) at the 2025 Gold Cup, scoring goals against Guadeloupe and the US. A versatile attacker who hit his first MLS goal in July and scored his fourth goal for Guatemala in an impressive World Cup qualifying win v Suriname. Born near Boston and came through the ranks at New England Revolution.

Pio ESPOSITO

Internazionale (Ita)
Age: 20
Striker

At a time when the Italy national team is desperately short of top-class strikers, the Inter youngster may be the answer to Gennaro Gattuso's prayers. Esposito has scored three goals in five caps since his *Azzurri* debut in September and is sure to be involved in March's World Cup play-offs. Netted 17 Serie B goals on loan at Spezia last season and now serves as understudy to Inter's line-leader and skipper Lautaro Martinez.

Alex FREEMAN

Orlando City (USA)
Age: 21
Right-back
The dynamic two-way right-back was named MLS Young Player of the Year and in the league's Best XI after scoring six goals in 2025. He has made an impact at national team level too, scoring twice in the 5-1 rout of Uruguay in November. Parma had a €2m bid turned down in May, but a move across the Atlantic seems to be on the horizon.

Victor FROHOLDT

Porto (Por)
Age: 19
Midfielder
In his first campaign at the Estadio do Dragao following a summer move from Copenhagen, the Danish box-to-box midfielder has made a huge impact in Portugal, and has also established himself in the Denmark midfield thanks to his non-stop industry, great distribution and tactical awareness.

Jean Claude GIRUMUGISHA

Al Hilal (Sud)
Age: 21
Forward
Burundi do not usually have much of an international profile but the 21-year-old centre-forward could give real impetus to the small East African country. Showing good form in the African Champions League for Sudan's Al Hilal, who this season are playing in the Rwandan top flight.

Konstantinos KARETSAS

Genk (Bel)
Age: 18
Attacking midfielder
Born in Belgium to Greek parents, the diminutive attacking midfielder makes for compulsive viewing when dribbling past flat-footed defenders at speed.

Even at this early stage of his career, he is already the main attacking outlet for both club and country. Well balanced and co-ordinated, deft and elusive on the ball and with an amazing predilection for coming out on top in one-on-one duels, he backs up that dribbling ability with left-footed guile, 20/20 vision, a great range of passing and marked willingness to take responsibility. He demands the ball and dictates terms and tempo.

As one might expect given his tender years, he is not yet the finished article. He remains rather lightweight, a little too easy for corpulent opponents to bully, he can give the ball away unnecessarily and can certainly add consistency to his game.

But enough of the hair-splitting. Young playmakers of his calibre are extremely rare and a string of top European clubs – Manchester United, Arsenal and Bayern Munich reportedly among them – are jostling to be at the front of the queue for his services. Under contract with Genk until 2029, he is likely to be sold in the not-too-distant future, then immediately returned to sender on loan.

Early last year, he had a difficult decision to make: which international team to represent. A Genk native, brought up just a stone's throw away from the club's Cegeka Arena, many assumed that he would opt for the *Diables Rouges* having represented them at various youth levels. In October 2024, while still only 16 years old, he made his debut for Belgium's Under-21 side and it seemed that his decision was made.

But instead he plumped for family ties and heritage. Within a few months, he was making his full debut for Greece in a UEFA Nations League play-off against Scotland in March 2025. And what an outstanding baptism it was, a mesmerising performance of poise, enterprise, energy and a well-taken goal, the second in Greece's 3-0 win.

With Greece subsequently failing to qualify for the 2026 World Cup and Belgium due to be part of the festivities, Karetsas' choice of flag could have left him with a pile of doubts or second-guesses. But he insists he has no regrets: "If I had chosen Belgium, Greece always would have been in the back of my mind," he said.

Senny MAYULU

Paris Saint-Germain (Fra)
Age: 19
Midfielder

It's far too simplistic to solely frame the Paris Saint-Germain academy graduate as a marksman for the big occasion, the kid who came off the bench to thump home his team's last goal in the 5-0 thrashing of Internazionale in the 2025 UEFA Champions League final and was again on the scoresheet in the Parisians' 2-1 win in Barcelona earlier this season. Mayulu offers much, much more than goals. He has an impressive football IQ, an intuitive feel for the collective good, is technically without blemish and mature way beyond his years.

The cherry on top of the cake is his versatility. He has excelled this season as an attacking midfielder, on the right wing, at right-back and as an emergency striker, the platform from which he calmly netted against Barcelona. Never fazed, a quick thinker and selfless by nature, he will deliver wherever he is deployed. While some insist that players can only truly kick on once they've settled on one position, PSG boss Luis Enrique does not agree.

"He has played a lot for us this season and he has profited from the absence through injury to others," said the Spanish coach, who first promoted Mayulu to the first-team squad in November 2023. "Senny is one of those flexible players. He can play in so many positions that he doesn't really need other players to be injured to get the call. It's a real plus for us when the opposition aren't certain where some of our players will line up. Senny is an exemplary player."

Mayulu is a poster boy for the new wave method of team-building at PSG. Out with the expensive superstars of old, in with the young, hungry and less egocentric. The change in emphasis is already working wonders and that's why PSG are so keen to hand Mayulu a contract extension, to take him through until 2029. Too many homegrown youngsters have left PSG in recent times, frustrated by a lack of playing time, but strategic advisor Luis Campos has vowed not to let that happen to Mayulu.

Born and raised by Congolese parents in the north-eastern suburbs of Paris alongside his brothers Fally (a striker for Championship club Bristol City) and Emany (a midfielder in Lyon's academy), he has a number of France youth caps to his name, featuring for the side that reached the final of the Under-19 European Championship in 2024 and since winning caps at U20 and U21 level. However, with a spot at next summer's World Cup potentially up for grabs, overtures from DR Congo could come his way over the coming months.

Darwin GUAGUA

Independiente del Valle (Ecu)
Age: 18
Midfielder

Made headlines in March when he started a World Cup qualifier before he had made his club debut, and has since become the revelation of the year from a club that always has a future star in or around the first team. Whippy figure who can operate wide on the right, but is perhaps better when attacking the space a few metres infield.

Javi GUERRA

Valencia (Spa)
Age: 22
Midfielder

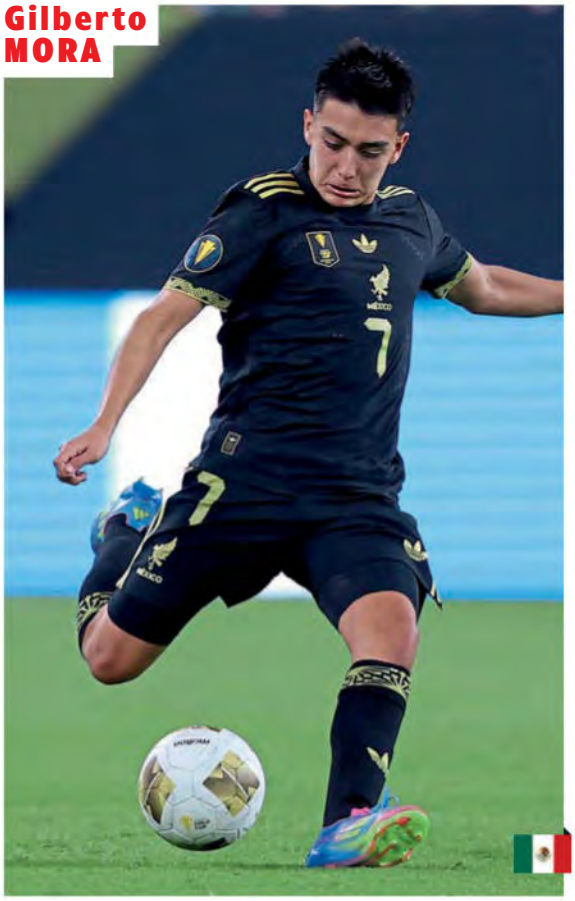
While the Spain U21 midfielder has found consistency elusive at a club struggling in all manner of ways this season, he remains a fine prospect. An outstanding box-to-box performer with drive, goalscoring ability and combativeness, he has been linked with Manchester United.

Ali JASIM

Al Najma (KSA)
Age: 22
Forward

Left Iraq for Como in 2024 but struggled for regular game time and has since been loaned out twice, first to Dutch outfit Almere City and now the Saudi Pro League. A massive talent, he will be thrust further into the spotlight if he can help take Iraq to the World Cup.

Gilberto MORA



Tijuana (Mex)
Age: 17
Midfielder

Despite only turning 17 in October, there have been high hopes in Mexico for Gilberto Mora for quite some time.

He has already broken numerous records since moving north to Tijuana from his hometown of Tuxtla Gutierrez, including, at the age of 15, becoming the youngest player to play for the club, and just six months later becoming Mexico's youngest-ever player shortly after turning 16.

His presence at the 2025 CONCACAF Gold Cup helped raise the profile of a tournament that doesn't always attract the same attention of its equivalents in Europe, South America or Africa. Mora's involvement in Mexico's Gold Cup-winning team captured headlines as he became the youngest player to win a major international tournament, taking the record Lamine Yamal had held since winning Euro 2024 with Spain. After spending the group stage on the bench, his performances in training demanded inclusion by the knockout rounds, including an impressive performance against the United States in the final.

Mora is a slight but aesthetically pleasing attacking midfielder who can use his touch and bursts of speed to escape more physical challenges in tight areas. His first touch is imaginative and can often help him lose his marker quickly. The control he shows under pressure, plus his acceleration, gives him the ability to beat a man, and this evasiveness means he has also been useful playing off the wing. Though primarily right-footed, his effectiveness with either foot gives opponents plenty to think about when trying to stop him. With just a bit more physicality, he could become world class.

The combination of attributes he already possesses has drawn attention to his talents at both club and international level, and 2026 could be a huge year in his development. There has been interest from clubs in Europe, and he's also likely to be part of the Mexico team at the World Cup. If he catches the eye as he did in the important knockout games in the Gold Cup, there will be plenty of interest in him from Europe's top teams – although he can't leave Mexico until he turns 18.

Despite already featuring for the senior national side, those in charge of the Mexico set-up decided to give him some World Cup experience by including him in the Under-20 version in Chile last autumn. He scored twice against Spain and again from the penalty spot in the group stage to defeat eventual winners Morocco as Mexico reached the quarter-finals.

The stage is now set for him to shine just as brightly on home soil in 2026.

Finn JELTSCH

Stuttgart (Ger)
Age: 19
Centre-back

Commanding defender who was recently crowned the best Under-19 player in Germany. Now stepping up to the U21s having previously captained the national team's U19 side, he is polished, a clean tackler, extremely quick and intelligent in his use of the ball. Ever the smart recruiters, Stuttgart signed Jeltsch last January to replace Anthony Rouault and still had change leftover.

Jonathan KALIMINA

Kafue Celtic (Zam)
Age: 17
Left-back

The Zambia defender had trials in Sweden before impressing at the Under-17 World Cup towards the end of 2025, but now he may have more prestigious suitors. His form in Qatar saw him named in Zambia's preliminary AFCON squad, although he didn't make the final cut.

Lennart KARL

Bayern Munich (Ger)
Age: 17
Attacking midfielder

Grabbed headlines by becoming Bayern's youngest Champions League goalscorer and has since become a regular in one of the three attacking roles behind Harry Kane. An off-the-cuff street player blessed with insane skills, he is already a serious World Cup candidate for Germany.

Sadriddin KHASANOV

Bunyodkor (Uzb)
Age: 17
Winger
Named Player of the Tournament after inspiring Uzbekistan to the Under-17 Asian Cup title in April 2025 and followed that up by scoring two goals at the Under-17 World Cup in November. A right-footed left-winger who can score goals as well as create them, he has already been linked with clubs in Europe, including Portuguese outfit Braga.

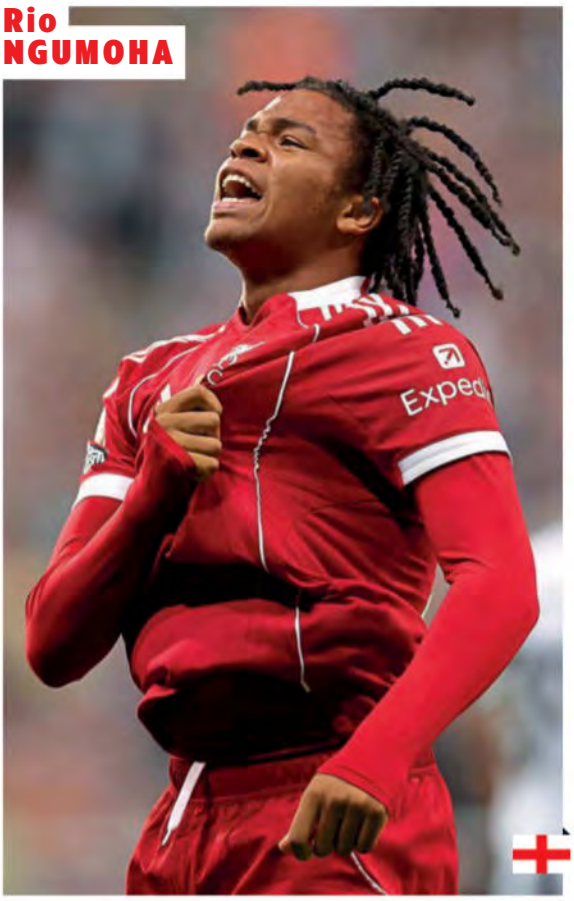
Kutlwano LETLHAKU

Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA)
Age: 19 Winger
The right-sided attacker had plenty of summer interest from European clubs after helping Mamelodi Sundowns to retain the South African championship and then starting one game at the Club World Cup. Sundowns, however, insisted that he stay for another season.

Fermin LOPEZ

Barcelona (Spa)
Age: 22
Midfielder
Has been linked with a move to a number of Premier League teams despite becoming a regular in Barcelona's midfield and a Spanish international. Possessing combative intensity and impressive attacking output, his value has shot up considerably since 2024 when he led Spain to Olympic gold.

Rio NGUMOHA



Liverpool (Eng)
Age: 17
Winger
Is it any wonder that some look at an underperforming Liverpool this season and call for more game time for the lively young winger? At a time when the Reds are dreadfully short of punch, incisiveness and unpredictability in advanced areas, the growing calls for Ngumoha to be let off the leash are perfectly understandable. Yes, he's a little raw. Yes, he has limited professional experience, with just a handful of substitute appearances in the Premier League and Champions League. But what Arne Slot's side desperately needs at the moment is a spark, and Rio's ball skills, high energy and ability to run defenders ragged could just ignite the fire.

Fearless to the nth degree, exuberant and viscerally obsessed with making things happen, the youngster with his socks around his ankles has enjoyed a number of impressive cameos for Liverpool these past few months, with one springing to mind in particular: the 100th-minute winner he slammed home in Liverpool's incredible 3-2 victory at Newcastle United in August. What a way to mark his Premier League bow and what a night to become Liverpool's youngest-ever scorer, aged just 16 years and 361 days.

The all-important question is how prepared Slot is to change course, to tear off the "Handle with Care" and increase Ngumoha's workload. The former Feyenoord boss is a firm believer in squad hierarchies, where players have to earn respect and pay dues. When commenting on Ngumoha signing his first pro contract – his new deal will keep him at the club until 2028 – in the autumn, Slot clearly laid out the rules of the pecking order game as he sees them: "The good thing for a youngster at Liverpool is that there are players you are playing with who are better than you. That helps you to stay grounded. If you train and play with other wingers like [Cody] Gakpo, [Mo] Salah, [Federico] Chiesa and all the others...he feels there still is a step to make. Firstly, to get to their level and if he is at their level, then it is about being as consistent as these players are."

Ngumoha, from the East End of London, was once a star pupil at the Chelsea academy, featuring there for eight years prior to a controversial break-up in the summer of 2024, lured away by persuasive voices from Anfield. So upset were Chelsea, that they were believed to have banned Liverpool scouts from attending academy games at their Cobham training base. All's fair in love, war and football, it seems.

Diego LUNA

Real Salt Lake (USA)
Age: 22
Attacking midfielder
Has quickly become one of Mauricio Pochettino's preferred players for the United States and likely to be involved in the World Cup squad, if not the starting XI. The Argentine was key in convincing Luna to resist calls from Mexico, for whom he is also eligible. A busy playmaker with a creative profile rare in the US, and an MLS All-Star for the last two years in a row.

Mason MELIA

Tottenham Hotspur (Eng)
Age: 18
Forward
Recently arrived in Tottenham from Dublin outfit St Patrick's Athletic a year after agreeing the move to North London, the teenager is arguably the most accomplished striker to come out of the Republic of Ireland since ex-Spurs hero Robbie Keane some 30 years ago. He signed off with 13 goals in 35 games in 2025, his final season in the League of Ireland, and has impressive finishing skills allied to a pronounced work ethic.

Nico O'REILLY

Manchester City (Eng)
Age: 20
Left-back/midfielder
In a time of transition at Manchester City, there are no certainties. While some of Pep Guardiola's hunches are sure to spectacularly work out, other experiments may not make it off the drawing board. Very much in the first category is Pep's recent decision to initiate a positional switch for 20-year-old local lad O'Reilly, converting him from a high-quality attacking midfielder into a left-back of huge promise. Rarely putting a foot wrong in the final weeks of last season, the Manchester-born youngster proved a revelation and he has carried on the good work this term, calm, reliable, technically-polished and full of attacking intent. City's new Algeria international defender Rayan Ait-Nouri – brought in from Wolves in a £32m deal in the summer – must be cursing his bad luck. Supposed to be the club's first-choice at left-back, the North African now finds himself as a back-up, derailed by an ill-timed ankle injury and the rapid development of O'Reilly.

Most surprisingly for a young man who never has appeared for England's Under-21s and has fewer than 40 Premier League appearances to his name, he has already forced his way into Thomas Tuchel's plans for the Three Lions, receiving his first call-up in October and handed his debut the following month in a 2-0 win against Serbia in a World Cup qualifier at Wembley.

"Nico had a fantastic debut today," said Tuchel afterwards. "He seems to be very shy, he doesn't speak a lot, but he is very intelligent on the pitch and adapted so well to all the new things we demanded from him. So well done."

O'Reilly, who also started in England's 2-0 victory in Albania a few days later, is clearly made of the right international stuff and has every chance of going to the World Cup. Left-back has been a problem position for England in the past and here we have a youngster who seems to have all the bases covered. His midfield background offers tactical flexibility and quality in possession, but he has stepped up to the plate defensively, too. Standing at well over 6ft, he certainly knows how to impose himself physically and this season has faced off against the right-wing threats of Noni Madueke, Bukayo Saka, Mohamed Salah and Rodrygo. On each occasion he more than held his own, even scoring against Real Madrid, and is increasingly trusted for the biggest occasions by Guardiola.

Alvaro MONTORO

Botafogo (Bra)
Age: 18
Attacking midfielder
Scored his debut goal, a last-minute winner for Velez Sarsfield, in the opening round of the 2025 Copa Libertadores. Skilful and clever, he was snapped up by Botafogo with the aim of selling him on to Europe – though that will have to wait until he has recovered from a fractured collarbone sustained at the Under-20 World Cup in October.

Rodrigo MORA

Porto (Por)
Age: 18
Attacking midfielder
Despite registering ten league goals last season – more than any other teenager in Europe's top seven leagues – Mora has had to share game time this campaign with new signing Gabri Veiga. With more minutes at club level, the fresh-faced talent could end up being a World Cup wild card for Portugal.

Rome-Jayden OWUSU-ODURO

AZ (Ned)
Age: 21
Goalkeeper
The Dutch U21 keeper of Ghanaian lineage has developed into one of the most sought-after young goalkeepers on the European circuit. A high-calibre shot-stopper, comfortable with the ball at his feet and a very stable individual, he has already played over 70 games for AZ.

Nico PAZ

Como (Ita)
Age: 21
Attacking midfielder
In contrast to his father Pablo, a tough central defender with 14 Argentina caps to his name, Nico is a play-to-thrill playmaker with a crystalline touch, who has already won six national caps himself. Arguably the purest technical talent in Serie A, his old club Real Madrid can re-sign him for just €9m in the summer.

RAYAN

Vasco da Gama (Bra)
Age: 19
Striker
Tall, strong and quick left-footed striker, who enjoyed a fine break-through in 2025 after switching from right-wing to centre-forward. Scored 19 goals for Vasco after helping Brazil win the South American Under-20 Championship. Joined Vasco at six, but may not stay much longer.

Lucas QUINTANA

Cerro Porteno (Par)
Age: 21
Centre-back
Classy defender with the traditional Paraguayan virtues of defensive resilience. Has already been part of the Cerro Porteno squad for three years, and played a part in the recent title win. Captained Paraguay at the South American Under-20 Championship a year ago, has outside hopes of making the senior squad for the World Cup and would add some much-needed youth to the defensive ranks if he did.

Ryunosuke SATO

FC Tokyo (Jpn)
Age: 19
Winger
The 19-year-old is wise beyond his years as he has shown in five appearance for the Japan national team, featuring in the largely second-string side that won the East Asian Football Championship last summer. Always wants the ball, technically excellent and fearless, he spent the 2025 season on loan at Fagiano Okayama from FC Tokyo.

SOUZA

Santos (Bra)
Age: 19
Left-back
Strong, talented full-back, proficient in attack and defence, who has done well in the difficult context of a relegation battle. Has been at Santos since the age of nine, but unlikely to stay for long amid growing interest from Tottenham Hotspur. Also on the radar of national team boss Carlo Ancelotti.

Petar SUCIC

Internazionale (Ita)
Age: 22
Midfielder
Although able to play anywhere in midfield, the young midfielder is at his best as an old-style wing-half, supplying dynamism, clever passing angles and refined control. Joined Inter from Dinamo Zagreb last summer. Born in Bosnia & Herzegovina but has 13 caps for Croatia.

Luciano VALENTE

Feyenoord (Ned)
Age: 22
Attacking midfielder
Ironically for a brilliant young playmaker with every chance of a future in the stratosphere, Valente admits that he does not have a head for heights. After swapping hometown club Groningen for Feyenoord in the off-season, the youngster was more than a little apprehensive on being informed that on the day of his unveiling at a club open day, he would be transported to Feyenoord's iconic home ground of De Kuip by helicopter. "Yes, I do have a fear of heights," the 22-year-old told a reporter.

Down on terra firma, the youngster is very much flourishing in Feyenoord's famous red-and-white halved shirts. Elegant and imaginative, quick to pick a defence-splitting pass and excellent at busting through the lines with the ball at his feet, Valente could not have wished for a better start in Rotterdam, and it was hardly a surprise when Netherlands head coach Ronald Koeman called him up for the first time recently.

Valente, who made his *Oranje* debut as a substitute in a World Cup qualifier against Lithuania in November, will not find it easy to carve out a niche for himself in a Dutch midfield stacked with talent. However, he clearly is moving in the right direction and must be a serious contender for inclusion in his country's World Cup squad. Just as well that he's modest and pragmatic: "We have some fantastic midfielders, players of great quality and I'm just not there yet. To play with them is something to look forward to and to learn from. [In international football] everything is faster: the passing, the speed of execution, the combinations."

Born in Groningen to a Dutch mother and Italian father, his first taste of the international game was with the *Azzurri*, representing them at Under-19 and Under-20 levels, but as time passed Italy's interest in him faded. The Dutch federation were only too happy to take advantage, including him in their Under-21 squad, and, in an ironic twist, his debut for *Jong Oranje* in March 2025 came in a friendly against Italy.

His Feyenoord coach Robin van Persie, a former Dutch attacking great who knows a thing or two about elite football, is convinced Luciano has what it takes: "I've seen enough of him to know. The way he trains, his hunger to improve, how he moves around. He has the drive to get better every day. He's a great guy to work with."

VITOR ROQUE

Palmeiras (Bra)
Age: 20
Forward

The most expensive player ever signed by a Brazilian club has already had an interesting career, playing in two Copa Libertadores finals for two different clubs (losing both) either side of an underwhelming spell with Barcelona. His time in Spain wasn't completely without merit – he showed more of his promise during a loan with Real Betis – before Palmeiras took him back across the Atlantic for a reported fee of just under £25m.

Palmeiras' logic is clear: they plan to use him for a while and then sell him back to Europe at a profit. They made a gesture of faith in the talent that shone first with Cruzeiro and then Athletico Paranaense before, at the end of 2023, Barca paid around £70m for him. At the time, Neymar was the only Brazilian to have cost more.

But Vitor Roque did not take to Camp Nou like Neymar did a decade before. It was far from clear that the coaches, first Xavi and then Hansi Flick, really wanted him. And in his limited opportunities he cut a frightened figure, nothing like the rampaging, confident barrel-chested youngster he had been in Brazil.

And the initial signs at Palmeiras were not promising either. The short-term motive for his acquisition was the Club World Cup, a title which is something of an obsession for Palmeiras. But he made little impression, and some wondered if the money had been squandered.

Coach Abel Ferreira sorted out the problem. He came to the conclusion that Vitor Roque is not a conventional number nine, squeezed up between the centre-backs. This is a striker who prefers space, who likes to charge forward, both with and without the ball, attacking areas in front of him. And so Palmeiras started playing with a front two – Vitor Roque advancing from the left channel, and the left-footed Argentine Juan Manuel "Flaco" Lopez on the right. Normally operating on the diagonal to each other, the pair hit it off and Vitor Roque, "The Tiger", was no longer caged. Instead, in the second half of the season he enjoyed feeding time to such an extent that he won a recall to the national team. More than 18 months after debuting against Morocco in March 2023, he came off the bench and won a penalty against Tunisia in November.

But what next? A big year is coming up. Can he keep himself in contention for a World Cup place? And will major European clubs trust his all-round game enough to give him a second chance on the other side of the Atlantic? Going into 2026, Vitor Roque has shown that he has the predatory instincts of a tiger – but he is one who still needs to earn his stripes.

Chemsdine TALBI

Sunderland (Eng)
Age: 20
Winger

The Wearsiders definitely picked up a bargain last summer in the shape of the £18m winger. Lightning-quick, direct and irrepressible in dribbling mode, he was one of Club Brugge's standout performers in last season's Champions League. A Belgium youth international, he made his Morocco debut in March and was included in the Atlas Lions' AFCON squad.

Neiser VILLARREAL

Cruzeiro (Bra)
Age: 20
Forward

Styles himself "Ney", but is a very different player from his Brazilian idol. Strong and guardsman straight-backed, he is an uncomplicated centre-forward. Had a superb 2025 for Colombia's Under-20 side, but has now left Millonarios for Brazil still in search of his maiden senior goal.

Can UZUN

Eintracht Frankfurt
Age: 20
Attacking midfielder

Whether on duty for club or country, the young playmaker represents limitless creativity and vision. Yet another example of Eintracht's shrewd recruitment, he came through the ranks at Nuremberg before joining Frankfurt for €11m in 2024. Born in Germany to Turkish parents.

Talentscout

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Two years ago, we picked out 50 young players to keep an eye on in 2024. Here's how some of them have got on since…

Johan BAKAYOKO

What we said: "The Belgium wide-man is one of the most effervescent and silky attacking young players in Europe today – little wonder the likes of Napoli, Paris Saint-Germain, Tottenham Hotspur and Liverpool are watching him."

Where is he now? Bakayoko joined German side **RB Leipzig** last year from PSV – although the Red Bull Arena tends to be a stopping point rather than a final destination for talented youngsters. So far, though, he has been somewhat overshadowed on the wing by his fellow summer arrival Yan Diomande.

Lucas BERGVALL

What we said: "Sensational Swedish prospect who can do it all: compete and tackle, dribble with considerable menace, serve as a distribution fulcrum and stealthily creep into goalscoring positions."

Where is he now? The February 2024 issue of *World Soccer* had barely hit the shelves when **Tottenham Hotspur** announced they'd secured the signing of Bergvall from Djurgarden. He moved to North London that summer, and has already played more than 60 games for the club.

Ibrahim DIARRA

What we said: "Mali's bronze medal at the Under-17 World Cup in December (2023) was based to a large extent on the contribution of their captain and right-sided midfielder, who got five goals and four assists."

Where is he now? **Barcelona** swooped to snap up the former street footballer from Academie Africa Foot almost as soon as those U17 World Cup finals had drawn to a close. Although the 19-year-old is yet to make his senior debut, he did score twice in the final as Barca's U19 side won last season's UEFA Youth League.

ENDRICK

What we said: "The decisive last few weeks of the 2023 Brazilian league campaign gave conclusive proof that the hype is most definitely justified. Stocky left-footed figure with bags of skill, pace and audacity, understanding of space, and mental toughness. Looks like a special talent."

Where is he now? Endrick has had a couple of standout moments for the Brazil national team, but he is yet to hit the heights expected of him at club level. By the end of 2025, 18 months after leaving Palmeiras for Real Madrid, he had just one La Liga goal to his name. Now looking to revive his career on loan at **Lyon**.

Jorrel HATO

What we said: "In an Ajax side that has struggled for much of this term, young Hato has had a heavy workload. But in a roundabout way, operating in such a malfunctioning side has allowed him the opportunity to shine."

Where is he now? There is a striking similarity between Hato's profile of two years ago and Youri Baas' on page 37, with both striving to hold together a struggling Ajax back-line despite their tender years. Hato joined **Chelsea** for £38.5 million last summer but has so far struggled for regular game time at the Bridge.

Michael KAYODE

What we said: "The match-winner in Italy Under-19s' victory over Portugal in the final of Euro 2023, Kayode is a marvellous attacking right-back of vim and panache."

Where is he now? It was a curious falling out of favour at Fiorentina for Kayode, who joined **Brentford** in early 2025 – initially on loan before a permanent move last summer – and has since proven just how wrong *La Viola* were to let him go. His long throws have grabbed the headlines, but he is also an accomplished defender that carries an attacking threat with the ball at his feet.

Joao NEVES

What we said: "After breaking into the Benfica starting XI in the final few weeks of last season, Neves has continued onwards and upwards this campaign...A player of high energy, precision passing and controlled aggression."

Where is he now? In August 2024, **Paris Saint-Germain** paid Benfica €60m to sign Neves, who is still only 21. It proved money well spent, as he starred alongside Fabian Ruiz and Vitinha in arguably the most celebrated midfield trio since Xavi, Andres Iniesta and Sergio Busquets in their pomp at Barcelona.

Kendry PAEZ

What we said: "In 2023 the hype was justified, and then some...It was striking how Paez had become the go-to man, the one his older team-mates looked to for inspiration."

Where is he now? The left-footed attacking midfielder or right-winger completed his move from Independiente del Valle to Chelsea upon turning 18 last summer, and was sent on loan to **Strasbourg** where he's mainly been used off the bench. Ecuador, with a squad full of elite defenders but short on attacking quality, are hoping that Paez and Keny Arroyo (see page 37) can mature in time for the World Cup.

Luciano RODRIGUEZ

What we said: "Rodriguez was the star of the South American Under-20 Championship at the start of 2023...Strong, good in open and reduced spaces, two-footed and able to operate across the attacking line."

Where is he now? Brazilian side Bahia broke their transfer record to sign Rodriguez in July 2024, but after just over a year he moved on again, this time to ambitious Saudi side **Neom** on their promotion to the Pro League. Yet to score in five games for Uruguay but likely to be involved in the World Cup this summer.

Ruben VAN BOMMEL

What we said: "In contrast to his father Mark – a crunching, no-nonsense defensive midfielder – young Ruben is infinitely more creative, a quick, bright and direct winger with a penchant for scoring goals."

Where is he now? Ruben joined Mark's former club **PSV** last summer from AZ and hit the ground running in Eindhoven with four goals in eight games, including one on his Champions League debut. But, cruelly, he then suffered a season-ending knee injury in a league meeting with Ajax.

Luka VUSKOVIC

What we said: "A prodigy by any definition, the teenager made his senior Hajduk Split debut in early 2023...Skippered Hajduk's Under-19s to the final of the 2022-23 UEFA Youth League."

Where is he now? Another young prospect to be snapped up by Tottenham Hotspur, the Croatian moved to North London last summer before being loaned out to **Hamburg** in their first season back in the Bundesliga. Now 18, he appears to have settled well, starting regularly in the middle of a back three and setting a new league record by winning a remarkable 18 headers in one game.

Leny YORO

What we said: "After making a handful of first-team appearances last term for Lille, the long and lean centre-back has seamlessly moved on to the next level in 2023-24: that of automatic starter."

Where is he now? **Manchester United** blew away rivals Real Madrid, Liverpool and Paris Saint-Germain to sign Yoro in the summer of 2024, making him one of the most expensive teenagers of all time. The jury is still out on whether it was money well spent, but the France U21 international's talent is clear.

William HILL
PREMIERSHIP
William HILL

10 Teams to watch in 2026

Jamie Evans picks out the sides that will be on *World Soccer*'s radar for the rest of the season

1 Hearts

With the season barely past the halfway point, any predictions about the Scottish Premiership should be made with a hefty dose of caution. While 2026 began with a genuine three-horse title race beginning to unfold, the individual flaws of Hearts, Celtic and Rangers means that any of the trio could at any point stumble and fall behind.

Celtic are beset by problems on and off the pitch, but the most expensively-assembled squad in the league has the quality and the knowhow to win their fifth title in a row. Meanwhile, Rangers might have dragged themselves into contention with a 3-1 win at Celtic Park, but they have also had their own share of off-field chaos and on-field inconsistency. All of which is to say that, of the three, Hearts have had the most enjoyable campaign so far.

They have already cleared the hurdle that last season tripped up Aberdeen, whose title challenge collapsed over Christmas. Hearts came through December with 2-1 wins over both of the Old Firm duo, before a 3-2 defeat at local rivals Hibernian. But there is still a long way to go as Hearts manager Derek McInnes, a former Dons boss himself, knows only too well; he will not need reminding that he has finished second in the Premiership four times without ever winning the trophy.

Plenty has been said about the influence of Brighton owner Tony Bloom on Hearts' recruitment, and they have added Dutch right-back Jordi Altena and Kazakhstan forward Islam Chesnokov to their ranks.

Though they have led for most of the season, Hearts will be aware that their only period off top spot was when Martin O'Neill returned to Celtic as caretaker. And, after the Northern Irishman's return to Parkhead following the sacking of Wilfried Nancy, the pressure will be dialled up. Hearts welcome Celtic to Tynecastle on January 25, and travel to Ibrox three weeks later, but there will be plenty more twists and turns to come.

2 Bayer Leverkusen

Has any club in Europe had a more topsy-turvy first half of the season than Bayer Leverkusen? After a summer that saw them lose head coach Xabi Alonso to Real Madrid, along with several members of the title-winning squad of 2023-24 including Florian Wirtz, Jeremie Frimpong, Granit Xhaka, Piero Hincapie, Jonathan Tah, Victor Boniface and Lukas Hradecky, a new era began with the summer appointment of Erik ten Hag. Yet the former Manchester United manager was sacked just three matches into the new campaign and replaced by former Denmark head coach Kasper Hjulmand.

The off-field chaos has been reflected in the results: at the end of August they threw away a 3-1 lead against ten-man Werder Bremen, then in the next game beat Eintracht Frankfurt despite going down to nine men themselves, while in the Champions League they have won away at Manchester City and Benfica but been beaten 7-2 at home by Paris Saint-Germain.

Slowly, Hjulmand seems to be bringing some order to proceedings. Leverkusen ended 2025 with an entertaining 3-1 victory against RB Leipzig to move third in the Bundesliga, are on track to reach the Champions League knockout round play-offs, and have a home tie against St Pauli in the German Cup quarter-finals to look forward to. Despite its hectic start, this season has big potential for the *Werkself*.

Has any club in Europe had a more topsy-turvy first half of the season than Bayer Leverkusen?

3 Lens

Lens began 2026 top of Ligue 1, with a strong start built on smart trading. After cashing in on the likes of defenders Abdukodir Khusanov and Kevin Danso they have picked up experienced bargains like Odsonne Edouard (Crystal Palace) and Florian Thauvin (Udinese), with the latter's form this campaign earning him a France recall. History suggests that Paris Saint-Germain will pull clear in the second half of the season, but Lens won't make it easy for them.

4 Thun

Better known for their stadium's scenic, Alpine surroundings, Thun ended a five-year absence from the Swiss Super League by winning the second division crown last season, and have simply carried on winning. They went into the winter break with a three-point cushion at the top of the table, with last season's champions Basel eight points adrift in fourth. The two sides meet on February 1 and then, tantalisingly, on the final day of the season.

5 Deportivo La Coruna

La Liga is increasingly becoming a graveyard for former Champions League clubs, with Valencia, Girona and Real Sociedad all currently flirting with relegation. Waiting to pounce, though, are another fallen giant: Deportivo. La Liga champions in 2000, the Galician club have not been in the top flight since 2018, and spent four years in the third tier until 2024, but are in the promotion mix and dreaming of an emotional comeback.

6 Fiorentina

A team that has been cup specialists in recent years – reaching two Conference League finals and a semi-final plus a Coppa Italia final and two semis since 2022 – Fiorentina have been struggling badly in Serie A. Three precious points against Jamie Vardy's Cremonese in January was enough to finally lift them off the bottom of the table, but not out of danger.

7 Wisla Plock

Poland's Ekstraklasa is surely the most wide-open top flight in Europe. At the winter break, there was just one point between the top four, three points between the top six, six points between the top nine, and just 11 points separating the entire 18-team division. Sitting atop of this most precarious of piles are Wisla Plock, who re-claimed top spot in December despite ending the winter campaign with five consecutive draws.

Another of Europe's high-flying promoted clubs, Wisla came up via the play-offs last season but have fared far better than Arka Gdynia and Bruk-Bet Termalica Nieciecza, the two sides that finished above them in the second tier in 2024-25.

So far, Wisla have spent more days in first place than anyone else, losing just twice. Led by 35-year-old Dani Pacheco, once a hot prospect at Liverpool, and leading scoring Lukasz Sekulski, also 35, they have the league's oldest squad, so staying power could be an issue, especially with so many teams breathing down their necks. But if they can manage it, they will be the third first-time Ekstraklasa champions in the last four campaigns, as the Polish league continues to be one of the most fascinating and unpredictable in the world.

8 Red Star Belgrade

Red Star emerged from the winter break a point behind rivals Partizan at the top of the table in Serbia but, in Aleksandar Katai and Mirko Ivanic, they had the two leading scorers in the league. An unusually sloppy Red Star, champions for the last eight years, have already lost more matches than in the whole of last season – but so too have Partizan, who will be hoping they are still top of the standings when the two eternal rivals meet on February 21.

9 Ludogorets

The only European team with a longer title-winning streak than Red Star Belgrade are Ludogorets, who have won the Bulgarian crown 14 years in a row, but they went into the winter break seven points adrift of Levski Sofia. Before Christmas, they replaced manager Rui Mota with Norwegian Per Mathias Hogmo, who took ten points from his first four games. A Swedish champion with Hacken in 2022, can he steer Ludogorets back to the top?

10 Red Bull Salzburg

The once-perennial champions of Austria have gone back to basics in a bid to avoid missing out on the league for a third consecutive year. Their talented squad is the youngest in the league, with attackers like Petar Ratkov, 22, Kerim Alajbegovic, 18, Edmund Baidoo, 19, Sota Kitano, 21, and Yorbe Vertessen, 24, all contributing to their league-leading 36 goals. At the winter break, they were top with a three-point lead over second-place LASK.

ITALY'S STADIUM RACE

Italy is in a race against time to be ready to stage its first major tournament since the 1990 World Cup

Words: Greg Whelan

Five venues to choose, up to €7 billion to be invested and six years to get the work done, Italy's stadium infrastructure is set for a radical overhaul as the country gears up for Euro 2032, which it is due to co-host with Turkey. At least three new grounds will be built from scratch, and several others upgraded in a long-overdue renovation of the country's leading arenas.

The pressure is on, however, to satisfy UEFA. President Aleksander Ceferin has criticised the current condition of Italy's infrastructure as "terrible," prompting fears that Europe's governing body might revoke its hosting rights altogether and switch the entire competition to Turkey.

The clock is also ticking. Only months remain for the projects to be approved and for the necessary funding to be found. Construction must begin by March 2027.

Italy and Turkey are due to provide half of the ten venues each for the 24-team tournament. While the latter has undertaken a wholesale modernisation of its grounds over the last two decades, its co-host has fallen behind most other European countries in this respect.

The majority of Italy's largest arenas, nearly all of which are publicly owned, were built before 1970 and have undergone little renovation since they hosted World Cup matches 36 years ago. A lack of funds, political wrangling and red tape have repeatedly been blamed for stalling projects.

Between 2010 and 2020, over 150 new stadiums were built in Europe. Only three were in Italy. Just one, Juventus' Allianz Stadium in Turin, currently meets UEFA criteria to host a major tournament.

"Italy's football infrastructure is a shame," said Ceferin in an interview with *SportMediaset* last year. "You are one of the biggest footballing countries, you've won many World Cups, Euros, Champions Leagues. At the same time, among the big countries you have by far the worst infrastructure.

"The clubs need help from the government, they need help from municipalities. Private investors will invest. It's time to do something, because the infrastructure is terrible."

In the light of Ceferin's remarks, Serie A president Ezio Simonelli admitted he was worried about Italy's co-host status.

"Is the candidacy at risk? I hope it's just my concern, but when the president of UEFA says that our stadiums are in a comatose state and the Euros are in six years' time, we risk not making a very good impression on an international level," said Simonelli.

Twelve cities have applied to stage matches. They have until the end of July 2026 to submit fully approved and financed projects to the Italian football federation, which will forward a shortlist of five to UEFA. The Italian government has appointed a special commissioner in an effort to co-ordinate funding and to speed up the process ahead of the deadline. UEFA will confirm its choice of venues by the end of this year.

Race against time ...Verona's Stadio Marcantonio Bentegodi is one of many Italian grounds in need of a makeover

Milan

Italy's largest and most iconic venue, the Giuseppe Meazza, or San Siro, is due to be demolished and replaced by a state-of-the-art stadium in time for Euro 2032.

Internazionale and Milan, who share the arena, have committed to a €1.4 billion joint project to build a 71,500-seater venue on the site. The condition of the existing ground has been one of the country's biggest concerns in its preparations for the tournament. Built in 1926, the San Siro has not undergone significant redevelopment since 1990. So pressing was the need to improve its facilities that UEFA decided to switch next year's Champions League final from Milan to Madrid's Estadio Metropolitano.

ABOVE: Unique design...the roof and its iconic red girders were added ahead of the 1990 World Cup

Italia '90...the view from inside a World Cup clash

Inter and Milan were exploring the possibility of building their own new grounds elsewhere in the city. In November, however, the clubs bought the stadium and surrounding land from the city council. The deal was signed just days before a protection order was due to come into force that would have prevented the existing ground from being demolished.

"Milan will finally have a stadium to rival the other great European football venues," said Milan chairman Paolo Scaroni.

San Siro... the famous old ground is set to be demolished

Rome

Euro 2020...the Olimpico hosted the opening match of the Euros in 2021

Rome is hoping to stage Euro 2032 matches at two separate venues.

In line with UEFA's requirements, the city authority is drawing up plans to upgrade the Stadio Olimpico, which also hosted games during Euro 2020. Roma, meanwhile, have submitted a proposal to build a new 62,000-seater stadium in the city. The club, which currently shares the Olimpico with Lazio, wants to move into its own home in the Pietralata district in the eastern quarters.

The €1.2 billion project, which is scheduled to be ready for the start of the 2029-30 season, will be financed by the club's US owners, The Friedkin Group.

"The future Stadio della Roma will be ready to come alive at the 2032 Euros," said Roberto Gualtieri, the mayor of Rome. "It's an objective that we've strongly desired."

Cagliari

After years of waiting, Cagliari finally have the green light to demolish their former home, the Stadio Sant'Elia, and build a new stadium on the site.

The Sant'Elia, which was built in 1970 and hosted England's group-stage games at Italia '90, has been sat derelict in recent years, with the club moving out for safety reasons back in 2012.

Previous moves to either renovate it or pull it down to make way for a new ground were frustrated by funding and bureaucratic issues. Since 2017, Cagliari have been playing at the Sardegna Arena, a temporary home built in the car park of the Sant'Elia.

The new venue, which will be named after the legendary Cagliari striker Gigi Riva, still Italy's record goalscorer, will have 25,000 seats, with the possibility to expand the capacity to 30,000 to meet UEFA requirements.

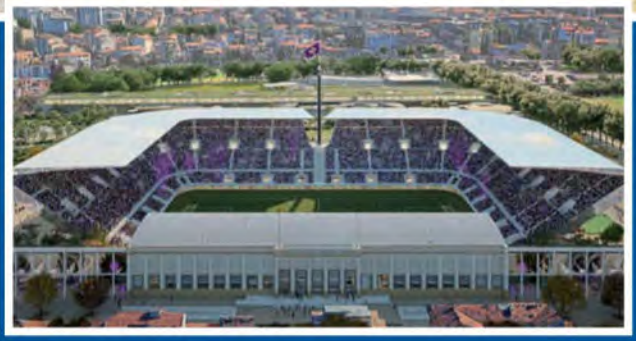
Expected to cost over €200 million, the scheme will be paid for by a combination of private investment and public funds.

Derelict...a bird's-eye-view of the Stadio Sant'Elia, a venue at the 1990 World Cup

Stadio Sant'Elia site...plans for Cagliari's new ground have been unveiled

Florence

Stadio Artemio Franchi ...the supporters' view of Fiorentina's ground



Redevelopment...a projected image of how the Stadio Artemio Franchi will look

A major overhaul of Florence's Stadio Artemio Franchi has been underway for two years, with Fiorentina's 95-year-old home being converted into a 40,000-seater arena. But construction has been held up by a financial shortfall and fresh funding needs to be found.

Work began on site in February 2024 and was originally due to be completed by August 2026, when the club celebrates its centenary. The Florence city authority had hoped that this would give the Franchi a head start in the race to be a Euro 2032 venue, but the project will now not be finished until the start of the 2029-30 season.

More alarmingly, the city authority has also confirmed that the revised cost of redevelopment will be around €265m, leaving a funding shortfall of between €50m and €60m.

Bologna

A renovation of Bologna's Stadio Renato Dall'Ara was announced by the club and the city council as far back as 2017. The plans for the ground, which was built during the 1920s, include adding a roof and bringing the stands closer to the pitch. More money still needs to be found, however, to meet the projected €200m budget.

Renato Dall'Ara...a projection of the planned renovations

Naples

Arguments over the future of the Stadio Diego Armando Maradona, the home of Serie A champions Napoli, could compromise Naples' ambition to be among the Euro 2032 host cities.

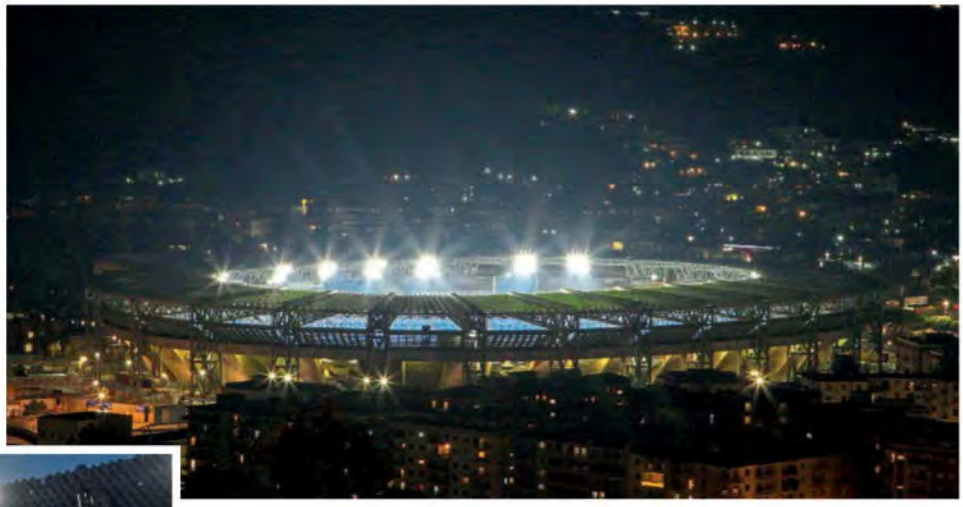
The municipality, which owns the 65-year-old ground, is proposing a €200m upgrade ahead of Euro 2032. The project includes increasing its capacity by re-opening the top tier, which has been closed since 2004.

However, Napoli president Aurelio De Laurentiis, who has described the ground formerly known as the Stadio San Paolo as "a dump" and "not a venue worthy of modern football", wants to build a new 70,000-seater stadium in the Poggioreale district of the city instead.

The revenue it would generate, he claims, would help his club to compete with Europe's elite.

"It'll take six years to renovate the Maradona," he said. "We'll be playing matches while they carry out the work, section by section. The economic impact won't be insignificant."

Italy's Sports Minister Andrea Abodi is appealing to both parties to reach a solution: "I find it hard to believe in a European Championship without Naples, but today the risk is there."



Night sky...an aerial view of Napoli's Stadio Diego Armando Maradona

Napoli's home... inside the stadium

Genoa

Plans have been submitted to refurbish Genoa's Stadio Luigi Ferraris with a new roof and to upgrade the ground's iconic four towers.

Expected to cost around €100m, the project is being financed by Genoa and Sampdoria, the two clubs who share the publicly owned arena, and private investment. Work is scheduled to begin later this year and be completed by the end of 2028.

ABOVE: Aerial view...how the renovated stadium could look
BELOW: Stadio Luigi Ferraris...one of the iconic four towers

Elsewhere

ABOVE: Stadio Marcantonio Bentegodi...Verona

ABOVE: Italy's third-biggest football venue...the Stadio San Nicola in Bari

Verona, Bari, Palermo and Salerno have also entered the race to be Euro 2032 host venues.

Modernisation of Bari's Stadio San Nicola, Italy's third-largest ground, will depend on the city authority finding the necessary funding. The 58,000-seater arena, which was built ahead of the 1990 World Cup, requires a roof and the removal of the athletics track.

Hellas Verona, meanwhile, have put forward plans to demolish the 62-year-old Stadio Marcantonio Bentegodi and build a new stadium on the site at a cost of €300m. Public funds are likely to be required to foot the bill.

Over in Sicily, Palermo, which is part of the City Football Group stable of clubs, are proposing to upgrade the Stadio Renzo Barbera.

The renovation required to bring Salerno's Stadio Arechi in line with UEFA's criteria, the regional authority claims, can be carried out by 2028.

ABOVE: Stadio Arechi...home to Serie C outfit Salernitana

Stadio Renzo Barbera... Palermo's stadium has hosted Italy's women

Portugal's white elephant

More than 20 years on from Euro 2004, Portugal provides a stark warning of the long-term effects of short-sighted stadia construction ahead of a European Championship

Colourful exterior...the eye-catching Estadio Municipal de Aveiro

With its colourful exterior and 32,830 capacity the Estadio Municipal de Aveiro is, on first viewing, an impressive stadium.

Scratch the surface, however, and you quickly uncover an arena that serves as a textbook example of short-sighted development and poor planning in preparation for the hosting of a major international tournament.

"It really should never have been built", Aveiro resident Chris tells *World Soccer*. "People here think it was a real waste of money".

Built for Portugal's hosting of Euro 2004, costing €62m to construct, the Estadio Municipal hosted two group games at the finals. Although one of these was Czech Republic's famous 3-2 victory over the Netherlands, this excitement didn't carry over.

Local side Beira-Mar – then in Portugal's Primeira Liga – moved in in 2003. However, the stadium was never designed for them. Average attendances have never climbed above 9,000 and now in the fourth tier, they pull in crowds of only several hundred.

Owing to its location – situated some 8km east of Aveiro's centre with no direct public transport link – and sentimental ties to their old Estadio Mario Duarte, Beira-Mar supporters largely despise their oversized home. Local residents more widely too, with each one indirectly paying for the upkeep of the stadium, which is owned by the Municipality of Aveiro.

Unsurprisingly, there have been repeated calls for the Estadio Municipal to be demolished. However, this seems unlikely given the Estadio Mario Duarte was torn down in 2020 to facilitate an expansion of the city's hospital.

Perhaps the most damning issue, however, is the Estadio Municipal is not a one-off case amongst Portugal's Euro 2004 host stadia.

There have been similar calls in recent years in Leiria to demolish their stadium – built for €77m. Meanwhile, the Estadio do Bessa in Porto currently has no tenant after the demise of Boavista.

While visually stunning – winning its designer the 2011 Pritzker Architecture Prize – Braga's Estadio Municipal is perhaps the starkest warning against over exuberant stadia building for tournaments.

Costing €122m and famously incorporating an iconic rock face at one end, in 2021 SC Braga announced plans to abandon the stadium and renovate their old Estadio Primeiro de Maio.

Knocked back by the municipal council, explaining the decision to *Tribuna Expresso*, Braga's mayor Ricardo Rio said: "This wish, which was conveyed to me by the club president, would corroborate a conclusion that many people from Braga have already drawn, which is that the Estadio Municipal was a waste of public resources, which does not even serve SC Braga".

UEFA guidelines of the time required only eight host stadiums, but Portugal used ten. Italy will only provide five venues for 2032, and are helped by their higher domestic average attendances.

However, given the difficulties being encountered in constructing some stadiums, Italy could learn lessons from Portugal. Otherwise, they stand to create their own Estadio Municipals.

James Kelly

Visually stunning...but Braga's Estadio Municipal is not popular with the locals

INTERNATIONAL SCOUTING

How an enterprising consultancy firm is utilising artificial intelligence to transform the footballing fortunes of international minnows

Words: Jamie Evans

In October of last year, the players of Samoa's Under-17 Women's side made history. Almost 40 years on from the federation becoming a FIFA member in 1986, the country had a team at a global tournament for the first time.

Two months on, Samoa's nearest neighbours, American Samoa, made some history of their own as their women's team won for the first time in their history by beating Tonga 3-0. Not only that, they picked up their second victory just three days later, this time a 4-0 win over the Cook Islands, to advance to the next stage of qualifying for the 2027 Women's World Cup.

Both of those landmark achievements came in part thanks to two British scouts and an innovative approach to international player recruitment that

First-ever win... American Samoa's women line up for their World Cup qualifier against Tonga *Credit: OFC Media via Phototek*

History-makers... Samoa at the 2025 Women's Under-17 World Cup

utilises Artificial Intelligence (AI).

A glance through Samoa's squad for the tournament in Morocco revealed its cosmopolitan nature. Many of the players involved play their football in the United States, New Zealand or Australia, and many also had names that would not immediately stand out as Polynesian in origin. Similarly, all but three of the American Samoan women's players are based in the US. Many of them were recruited thanks to Russell Gurr and Alastair McLae, co-founders of the International Football Consultancy (IFC).

Although both men are from footballing backgrounds – Russell, who lives in Scotland, has worked as a scout for Scottish Championship side Ross County while Alastair, based in New Zealand, is an OFC-licensed coach – it is their use of AI that gives them their USP.

"In a nutshell, we've got a system," explains Russell. "We know, based on various pieces of information about an individual, what the likelihood is that it would link to a nationality. What we've essentially done is built a model which has a huge database of professional footballers. It just finds all the publicly available information and then puts it through an algorithm that we've built, which gives us a probability of the top five nations that that person is able to represent. That's a really good indication for us of who to reach out to.

"We've got that for most footballers out there. I would say we cover all the major leagues around the world and all the youth squads."

One of the surprises of this method has been how many players don't realise which countries they are eligible to play for.

"We found that when you have all the players in the Premier League youth teams, they don't ask each individual player: 'Where were your grandparents born? We'll put it into the system'. There's nothing like that," adds Alastair. "They wait for countries or scouts to contact them.

"We know that there's a huge gap there and that's where we're trying to fill. We can go to players and say: 'Did you know you could actually represent this country? Here's the journey to get there'."

FOUNDING THE IFC

For smaller countries that lack the funding to develop their own elite footballing programmes, Russell and Alastair's work can be a game changer. The pair met while scouting for Samoa, and almost all of their initial clients have been based in Oceania.

"We started working for Samoa in late 2020, originally brought on as a kind of voluntary head of scouting," explains Alastair. "The remit was to just find as many players as we could that were eligible to play for Samoa anywhere in the world, and design a database that the national coaches could then select from."

> Almost 40 years on from the Samoan federation becoming a FIFA member in 1986, the country had a team at a global tournament for the first time

The results were impressive. Over four years, Russell and Alastair estimate that they identified around 350 eligible players across both the men's and women's youth and senior squads, of which almost 70 made their debuts. In some cases, as many as 80 per cent of the teams were comprised of overseas players that had been spotted by Alastair and Russell.

"We were finding them in all sorts of places – Qatar, the Premier League, Spain, lots in America – they were everywhere," adds Alastair. "The more we got into it the more we found, because they're big families and so once they cottoned on that we were the real deal, they said: 'Oh go and speak to my cousin in Portugal', or wherever. Some players didn't even know they could play for Samoa."

As their methods continued to bear fruit, the pair began to think bigger.

"About a year into the project, Russ and I thought: 'Actually, there's a blueprint that we've developed that other countries would benefit from,'" says Alastair. "We thought: 'Can we expand this into other countries?'"

The IFC was officially born in 2022, with Alastair and Russell implementing many of the practices they had developed with Samoa. Their next clients were the Cook Islands followed by Fiji, who both brought different challenges.

"Samoa has around 200,000 people, plus quite a few around the world, but the Cook Islands has about 18,000 people in the country and a lot less around the world," explains Alastair. "It was very hard to get eligibility for a player to get there, but I think we still found about 60 players.

"And then we moved on to Fiji. They're a much larger nation that have qualified for a couple of youth World Cups, and there are a lot more Fijians as well. Unfortunately, the eligibility criteria is crazy; if you haven't got a Fijian passport when you're 18 years old, you have to live in Fiji for five years to get a passport. We found an eligible Fijian player who was playing at an English Championship club, but he was 21 years old and he was like: 'I'm not coming back to Fiji for five years. I'm going to carry on playing in England.'"

In both cases, the federations wanted quick results for their senior teams. But Russell and Alastair are particularly proud of their ability to develop what they call a "conveyor belt of talent". The focus on long-term success was key to their success with Samoa.

"We found players that were 12, 13, 14 years of age and we just kept them in the database," says Alastair. "We waited a couple of years until they were eligible for the Under-16s and then, boom, they selected them."

The recent expansion of the FIFA Under-17 World Cups – both the men's and women's editions now take place annually and feature 48 teams – mean that smaller nations now have more opportunities than ever to blood young players in international competition. "It's a game changer especially for OFC countries," says Alastair.

MAKING HISTORY

In May 2025, Alastair and Russell signed a long-term partnership with American Samoa. With no men's international football of note in the region for the rest of the year, the initial focus was on the women's sides. They quickly found a host of eligible players, all based in the US, and the federation invited 30 of them to a training camp in Las Vegas to prepare for the World Cup qualifiers in late November and early December.

To put the scale of the challenge facing them into context, those games were the 24th and 25th since American Samoa's first-ever match, a 21-0 defeat to Australia in 1998. The first 23 games brought 21 defeats, zero wins, two goals and 145 conceded. As one of the four lowest-ranked teams in the region, they were taking part in the first round of qualifying, with a spot in February's second round up for grabs.

Yet as it turned out, they cruised through, sweeping much higher-ranked Tonga and the Cook Islands aside with relative ease. By scoring two goals in the first game, Cassidy Drago, one of nine in the 19-player squad who had been identified by the IFC, instantly became the team's all-time record scorer.

Still, this is not simply a case of packing the squad with ringers. Captain Alma Mana'o, 31, has been part of the squad since 2011, while Oloa Tofaeono, Elcy Lui and Rochelle Lui all play for local clubs. Rather than taking over, the new arrivals have given everyone a lift.

Allied to the recruitment strategy, American Samoa also have an impressive coaching set up led by head coach Amanda Cromwell, a former United States international of 55 caps.

Alastair is backing the team to do well in February's qualifiers, where they will face the IFC's former employers, Samoa, as well as the Solomon Islands and regional heavyweights New Zealand.

"These guys are going all in, which is really exciting, and there's more potential in American Samoa. I think we're on a

Under-17 Women's World Cup...Samoa celebrate scoring against France

BELOW: Finding the right blend... American Samoa players celebrate reaching the next stage of World Cup qualifying *Credit: OFC Media via Phototek*

Record breaker ...Cassidy Drago celebrates scoring for American Samoa
Credit: OFC Media via Phototek

pretty interesting roller-coaster ride with these guys."

FINDING THE RIGHT BLEND

As tapping into diasporas becomes an increasingly common tactic across the world, Alastair warns against federations looking for quick and easy results.

"There are a lot of countries out there doing it now, but they're just a bit short-sighted. They haven't got the strategy in place.

"We've seen examples of some countries where they're building their squads with a lot of players from other countries, but they're older players. They're going for [men's] World Cup qualification, and they could get there, but a lot of those players are in their 30s now. In four years' time, they'll probably be past it.

"Part of our remit is to start that conveyor belt of players, find those 13, 14, 15-year-old players that will be ready in the future, that you can bring in and start that ten-year cycle."

Striking a balance between homegrown and naturalised players is also important.

"I went to Tahiti for six weeks with Samoa Under-19s and we had about 80 per cent overseas players and there was definitely a clash of cultures," says Alastair. "We had 20 per cent domestic players who weren't at the standard, technically and tactically, but they had Samoa on their sleeve. They went in for every tackle, they spoke Samoan. And then the international players that came in, it was the opposite. Tactically and technically they were far greater, but they weren't really fighting for every ball, they weren't playing for their village. So it's got to be a balance."

> "We can go to players and say: 'Did you know you could actually represent this country? Here's the journey to get there'"
>
> **Alastair McLae, IFC co-founder**

THE FUTURE

The IFC approach is certainly more efficient than the old-fashioned methods, where international managers relied on endless legwork or in some cases sheer luck to unearth eligible players. Former Wales striker Hal Robson-Kanu, for example, was an England youth international before a chance encounter with the then-Wales head coach Brian Flynn at Reading's training ground. After Royals winger Glenn Little joked to Flynn that Robson-Kanu would be eligible for Wales because he holidayed there, the London-born forward explained that yes, he did – because that's where his grandmother is from.

Robson-Kanu went on to play a significant role in Wales' qualification for Euro 2016 and at the finals themselves – their first major tournament in more than half a century – and it is tempting to wonder what the IFC could do for nations of a similar stature. They have had conversations with federations in Europe, Asia and the Caribbean, and are currently in talks with ten different countries.

"Our methods would be ideal for bigger nations – and that's the next step forward," says Russell.

Alastair agrees: "I think our next milestone is to find a player for one of the biggest countries and they go on to feature in the men's World Cup."

The expansion of the World Cup to 48 teams has opened the door to hundreds of players that would have never had the chance to compete at that stage before.

"You're going to get more players that are going to want to play international football because they've got a chance at appearing at a World Cup," predicts Russell. "You're going to have more players that are slightly more open to switching heritage or playing for their background because of that goal. And it will work in favour for the countries as well because their squads will arguably get better as well.

"We think we can have an impact on the World Cup."

International Football Consultants...Alastair McLae (above) and Russell Gurr (below)

Naturalised... Wales hero Hal Robson-Kanu was born in London

GARY LINEKER

"England have been knocking on the door for a while – eventually you'll get it open"

On his first time back in Mexico since collecting the World Cup Golden Boot in 1986, the former England striker reflects on his career, the Three Lions' hopes for 2026 and being inducted into the International Football Hall of Fame

So many years later now, what can you recall about playing for England at that 1986 World Cup beyond that quarter-final with Diego Maradona's "Hand of God" goal?
First of all, I remember the flight out. We had an emergency landing on the way in, which was a bit scary. Next I remember the armed convoy to greet us which was a bit remarkable. We thought: "What's going on?" Then I remember the severe heat of Monterrey, 43°C. That sticks out. I remember us standing on the pitch before kick-off against Poland and we were all thinking: "How do we play in this?"

I scored my hat-trick in the first half, and in the second half I remember feeling dizzy because of the heat. You expend a lot of energy celebrating when you score a goal, both emotionally and physically, so I was shattered for the second half. I think I lost 12 pounds in that game. Because of the heat, we were limited to an hour a day at the swimming pool by Bobby Robson. Then it would be: "That's enough. Out you get."

I don't have a memory for goals I've scored unless I see them on TV but some things stick in the mind, not only like the Hand of God match but also the team talk before the Poland game. Bobby's team talks went on a bit, but before that game he got us all together in the hotel before we left for the ground and gave us this stirring 30 seconds, something like: "I could give you all the possible permutations but you've got the ability to do this, I believe in you, you believe in yourselves, all we need to do is win, we don't need to think about anything else!" It was goosebumps stuff, amazing. But he always had a board behind him and then he said: "Just before you go, if you're interested in the permutations..." and then he went through every one of them for about half an hour. It was classic Bobby. Either way, it worked.

Looking back, which was the more satisfying – losing the quarter-final to Argentina partly because of injustice and a goal which would not stand today, or coming within a penaty shootout of the final four years later?
I think team-wise we were better in 1990, we had more going for us than in 1986. Defensively we were better, we had more flexibility because we alternated the system depending on the opposition. Also, in Mexico the conditions were hard, playing in 40-degree-plus heat, and the pitches weren't that good. I mean, you wait all your life to play in a World Cup then when we got to Monterrey two sides of the stadium were bushes. It was like being back playing amateur football. But then we moved down to the Azteca which was something else.

I don't think we played particularly well in the Argentina game until John Barnes came on in the second half. But I do think that in the 1990 semi-final we played well against a very good German team. We gave as good as we got. So, not much between the two but if you get to a shootout in the semi-final of a World Cup then you're a whisker from the final – in which I think we would have had a really good chance. Argentina had injuries, they were tired and Diego wasn't the Diego of four years earlier.

Looking back, "regret" would be the wrong word; it would be "disappointment" and more about the semi-final in 1990 than the quarter-final in 1986.

Two years later you ended your international career in the anti-climax of a group-stage exit at the 1992 Euros in Sweden. What had happened to the team?
By then Graham Taylor had come in as manager and it was a general time of change. Some of the old guard had gone and he left out a few others – like Peter Beardsley and Bryan Robson – probably prematurely. We didn't have Chris Waddle by then so we didn't have much creativity in the team. So it's the two World Cups which were the most memorable moments from my time with England.

ABOVE: Hat-trick hero...Lineker celebrates one of his three goals against Poland ABOVE RIGHT: Barca highlight... Lineker lifts the European Cup Winners' Cup in 1989 after victory against Sampdoria in Bern, Switzerland

Turning to your club career, which spell with which club stands out?
I would never pick out just one because they were all special for different reasons. Firstly Leicester were my club as a kid and to play for your own team is amazing. In 1985 I went to Everton and that was the best team I played for. We had a really amazing side in the mid-1980s and just missed out on winning something, pipped in the league and FA Cup by Liverpool of all people, which was just the worst. If I'd stayed two or three seasons there we'd have won quite a few trophies but obviously, in 1986, the Barcelona move came up and to play for Barcelona is a bit special. It's just such a huge club and I had a great connection with the other players and the fans. Then when I came home winning the FA Cup with Tottenham was very special – and dramatic.

A highlight from your time in Barcelona?
Winning the 1989 European Cup Winners' Cup final against Sampdoria in the old Wankdorf stadium in Bern was a highlight, even though I was playing out on the right wing.

Why was that?
Johan Cruyff had come in as coach in 1988 for what turned out to be my final season. Remember, you were allowed only two foreign players in Spain in those days and I think he wanted his own foreign players, which I understood. Also, I'd had hepatitis in 1988 so I was out until about November and I didn't get an ideal start with him. So he put me out on the wing. I think he was trying to force me to whinge so the fans would turn against me but I could see what he was doing so I just got on with it. I found it quite easy playing on the wing. I didn't enjoy it because for me the thrill of football is scoring, and when you played as a winger you were right out on the touchline.

Still, there were moments. I enjoyed his coaching because he was brilliant – he and Terry Venables were the best technical/tactical coaches I played for – so I learned quite a lot about the game. It was frustrating but we did go on to win the European Cup Winners' Cup, which was a big deal and it was a special victory against a decent Sampdoria team with Gianluca Vialli, Roberto Mancini and one or two others.

> "If I'd stayed two or three seasons at Everton we'd have won quite a few trophies"

Could it all have been handled better?
Cruyff should have just come to me and said: "Gary, no offence but I want my own foreign players so we need to get you moved on." I would have understood because anyway I had quite a few clubs interested, but he didn't do that. So that's where I got this amazing connection with the fans because I just got on with it and I think they respected me for that. I always get treated very nicely when I go back to Barcelona.

World Cup Golden Boot winner...Lineker in action against Poland at the 1986 finals in Mexico

It's the footballer they remember, of course, not the TV presenter?
Yes, I get all of how it is now. It's a generation who don't remember so it's interesting when today's players get close to a record. For example, I've scored more World Cup finals goals for England [ten] than anyone else – Harry Kane is only two behind me so he could catch me up. Again, I was the only England player to win the World Cup Golden Boot [in 1986] until Harry did it in Russia. Times like these remind people that you did play football as well and were alright at it. It'll be the same in the summer.

Finally, how do you view Thomas Tuchel's England and the prospects for 2026?
You can see improvements but it's very difficult when you're not playing anyone major, with all due respect to the other teams in England's qualifying group. That makes it hard to see where we are. It'll be interesting to see what Thomas Tuchel does with Jude Bellingham and Phil Foden. England do have an exceptional squad and it's a great challenge to fit so many talented players into the system, almost more difficult than if you have no players.

It won't be easy over there. Spain have to be favourites, Argentina will put up a decent defence of their trophy and France will be strong. The usual suspects will all have a chance. But so do England. They have been knocking on the door for a while and, if you keep knocking, eventually you'll get it open.

Interview by Keir Radnedge

Hall of Famer ...Lineker was inducted into the *Salon de la Fama del Futbol* in November

Glenn Moore

Arsenal stay in Champions League hunt

The holders advance to the knockout phase, but defending their European crown will be tricky

Halfway through the league stage of the new-look Champions League, holders Arsenal were fearing elimination. Two defeats in three matches had left the Gunners 11th in the 18-team league, a point above the cut-off.

When they fell behind at home to Real Madrid in the fourth match, alarm bells were clanging. The decisions to hand caretaker coach Renee Slegers a long-term contract and to not renew an ageing team were understandable in the wake of their triumph over Barcelona in last year's final, but a few months on the question was being asked: were they mistakes?

But Alessia Russo was on hand to answer with a resounding no. With two goals the England striker turned the game around, and a 1-0 win over Twente in the next game secured qualification.

Nevertheless, under the new structure their slow start means they face a play-off tie to reach the last eight.

Though two extra games are unwelcome, the play-off itself should not be a problem – they face OH Leuven, a team they have already beaten 3-0 away. The headache will come in the quarter-finals where they will play Chelsea, who they've beaten once and lost to thrice in the last two years.

The winners are then likely to meet OL Lyonnes in the semi-final, with Barcelona the probable final opponents given that the Spanish champions are in the weaker half of the draw. If Arsenal do manage to retain the trophy they'll have done it the hard way – although given their patchy league form, few expect them to do so.

If not Arsenal, then who? The usual suspects are in the frame: Barcelona, Lyonnes and perennial bridesmaids Chelsea, all of whom eased into the last eight unbeaten. Making up the direct qualifiers into the quarter-finals were Bayern Munich, which represented an impressive recovery after losing their first game 7-1 at Barcelona. The German champions are outsiders, but should not be underestimated.

Elsewhere, Champions League debutants Manchester United made a solid start with four wins – even if a 3-0 home defeat by Lyonnes, in which they did not have a shot on target, was a reminder of the standards set by the elite. Defeating PSG, who had ended the Red Devils' only previous European campaign two years ago, was a highlight. They now meet Atletico Madrid, seeking a quarter-final place for the first time in six years, with Bayern waiting for the winners.

In the same section of the draw, Barca have a potential *Clasico* quarter-final to look forward to should Real Madrid beat Paris FC in the play-offs.

> If not Arsenal, then who? The usual suspects are in the frame: Barcelona, OL Lyonnes and perennial bridesmaids Chelsea

The new format proved largely successful. Only two of the nine games in the final round were dead rubbers, and that was due to a quirk of the draw in that four of the five already eliminated teams played each other.

Attendances were modest, not helped by Arsenal playing their matches at Borehamwood rather than the Emirates. The importance of venue was underlined by PSG drawing 13,798 to the Parc des Princes for the tie with Bayern, but only 478 to the 1,100-capacity training ground stadium for the match with Real Madrid. Similarly, Bayern had 15,407 for Arsenal at the Allianz Arena, but only 2,367 for Juventus and 2,120 for Valerenga at the training ground, which only holds 2,500.

Bayern have since announced the acquisition of the 15,000-capacity Sportpark Unterhaching, home of SpVgg Unterhaching, once a men's Bundesliga team but now in the regional league. The plan is to make it the new long-term home of the women's team.

There were some record-breaking crowds, notably Paris FC with 15,207 for the visit of Barca, and OH Leuven with a club record 9,285, also a Belgian record for the competition, against Arsenal, who themselves brought more than 1,000 fans. It was, said Slegers, "a special night".

Leuven were the positive surprise of the league stage. The debutants only won once, against Twente, but enjoyed their trips to the French capital by securing draws away at Paris FC and PSG and also held a disappointing Roma team.

The unexpected failure was PSG. That point at home to Leuven in matchday five was their first, and it spelled their elimination with a match to spare. For the former two-time finalists, a team that had made the semi-finals four times in the last six seasons, this was a grievous shock.

A 6-1 defeat to Lyonnes in the French league in September did not auger well,

Surprise packages ...newcomers OH Leuven drew with PSG and Paris FC

Holders...Arsenal players celebrate during their crucial win v Real Madrid

but no one could have anticipated that a PSG squad featuring the likes of Spanish World Cup winner Olga Carmona, former England goalkeeper Mary Earps, and a quartet of current France internationals headed by Griedge Mbock Bathy and Sakina Karchaoui would lose their first four Champions League matches. They were beaten 4-0 at Wolfsburg and 2-1 at Manchester United, and lost at home 2-1 to Real Madrid and 3-1 to Bayern Munich.

Meanwhile the quarter-finals of the inaugural Europa Cup will take place in February. With Internazionale knocked out by Swedish club BK Hacken, the only remaining team from the big five leagues are Eintracht Frankfurt. Seven nations are represented, fulfilling the principle of increasing continental competition for the smaller nations.

THE DRAW

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE
Atletico Madrid/Manchester United v Bayern Munich
Paris FC/Real Madrid v Barcelona
OH Leuven/Arsenal v Chelsea
Wolfsburg/Juventus v OL Lyonnes
Dates: *Knockout round play-offs: Feb. 11-12 & 18-19;*
Quarter-finals: March 24-25 & April 1-2;
Semi-finals: April 25-26 & May 2-3;
Final (Oslo): May 23

EUROPA CUP
Sparta Prague/Austria Vienna v Sporting/Hammarby
E. Frankfurt/Nordsjaelland v BK Hacken/Breidablik
Dates: *Quarter-finals: February 11 & 18;*
Semi-finals: March 24-25 & April 1-2;
Final (two legs): April 25 or 26 & May 2 or 3

Round-up

FIFA Women's Champions Cup final host...Emirates Stadium

ARSENAL AND BRENTFORD TO HOST FIFA CHAMPIONS CUP

Arsenal will host the final of the inaugural FIFA Women's Champions Cup on February 1 – and they will hope to be playing in it. The Gunners meet Morocco's AS FAR in one semi-final, with Gotham FC facing Brazil's Corinthians in the other. Brentford will host both semi-finals on January 28.

AS FAR qualified by beating Wuhan Jiangda in a dramatic tie in Morocco in December. The Chinese visitors led through Wang Shuang's 29th-minute goal until the 89th minute when Hajar Said's header forced extra-time. Sanaa Mssoudy then scored a well-taken winner in the 104th minute.

The African champions will be rank outsiders against Arsenal, but the other semi-final should be more closely contested though the US side, who include former Corinthians striker Gabi Portilho, are more fancied.

CITY LEAD WSL INTO 2026

Manchester City had a six-point lead going into the winter break in the WSL. City, in their first season under Andree Jeglertz, have finished second six times since their only title in 2016.

Khadija "Bunny" Shaw spearheaded City's charge with 12 goals, the most of any striker in Europe's big five leagues. The Jamaica striker ended the year with four goals v Aston Villa, taking her to 103 goals in 120 games for City.

Goal machine...Khadija "Bunny" Shaw

Chelsea, going for a seventh successive title, are second, with Arsenal and Manchester United two and three points further adrift respectively.

Liverpool, who hired City's former boss Gareth Taylor in August, went into the winter break bottom of the league, two points adrift of West Ham United, who replaced Rehanne Skinner with Rita Guarino after Liverpool snatched a late equaliser in London in the final round of 2025.

Mid-table London City Lionesses were another club to change coach, with Spaniard Eder Maestre replacing the sacked Jocelyn Precheur.

BARCA SUPREME IN SPAIN

Barcelona suffered a rare defeat in Liga F, beaten 1-0 at Real Sociedad in November, but still led the table by seven points when the winter break arrived. Real Madrid were second with *La Real* two points further back in third.

That defeat aside, Barca, champions for the last six seasons, were as dominant as ever with 62 goals scored and three conceded. Ewa Pajor (11) and Claudia Pina (10) topped the scoring charts.

BAYERN LEAD IN GERMANY

Unbeaten Bayern Munich were the Frauen Bundesliga "winter champions", ahead of Wolfsburg despite a surprise home draw with bottom club Carl Zeiss Jena. Wolfsburg's 3-1 home defeat to Bayern in October was key, though the Lady Wolves' home loss to a ten-player Eintracht Frankfurt was also damaging.

ROMA TOP ITALIAN STANDINGS

Roma may have had a tough time in Europe, but at home they built a five-point lead over champions Juventus at the end of the autumn programme. The capital club, under new coach Luca Rossettini and seeking a third title in four years, had been beaten only by third-placed Fiorentina.

LYONNES PERFECT IN FRANCE

New name, same results for OL Lyonnes who lead in France having won all 11 matches to establish a seven-point advantage over PSG, with Paris FC three points further back in third.

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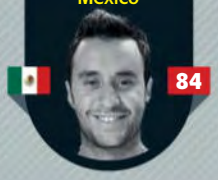

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NEEL SHELAT

PSG edge out Flamengo in Intercontinental Cup

Second edition of FIFA's new competition is decided on penalties in Doha final

Paris Saint-Germain are the newest champions of the FIFA Intercontinental Cup, the competition that pits the men's club champions from each confederation against each other at the end of every calendar year.

Technically this was only the second edition of the competition in this format, although such a tournament has existed for many years. It was known as the FIFA Club World Cup for the last two decades or so, while the old Intercontinental Cup ran from 1960 to 2004 but only featured the champions of Europe and South America.

FIFA's new Intercontinental Cup falls somewhere between its two predecessors, with only four teams coming along to the week-long final stage. The "Derby of the Americas" kicks the week off, with the winner getting a spot in what is effectively a semi-final. The winner of that match, known as the "Challenger Cup", advances to the final where the European champions await them.

The other contestant of the Challenger Cup is decided earlier after two standalone rounds. This year, the Intercontinental Cup kicked off in September when first-time African champions Pyramids hosted perennial Oceania winners Auckland City of New Zealand. The Egyptians came away with a comfortable 3-0 win, moving on to the second round in which they

Flamengo standout star...the impressive Giorgian De Arrascaeta carries the ball against Cruz Azul

travelled to Jeddah to meet Asian champions Al Ahli. DR Congo forward Fiston Mayele made the headlines there with a hat-trick that upset the odds and booked Pyramids' ticket to Qatar.

Cruz Azul of Mexico also had a long time to prepare for their trip having won the CONCACAF Champions Cup back in June, but their Derby of the Americas opponents were only decided about ten days prior to the match when Flamengo defeated Palmeiras in the Copa Libertadores final. The Brazilian side went on to seal their league title in the following days and certainly looked like the favourites on paper, but the big question was whether they would have enough in the tank to go the distance in the Intercontinental Cup.

Not that they were lacking any motivation: victory in Qatar would have seen Flamengo add a historic world title to their state, national and continental crowns in 2025.

They got a sturdy test from their Mexican opponents, who kept more of the ball in the first half. An errant pass across their own box gifted Flamengo an early lead through Giorgian De Arrascaeta, but Cruz Azul did not let their heads drop and got an equaliser on the stroke of half-time. The contest remained very even on the other side of the break, but the South American champions eventually found an extra gear, with De Arrascaeta scoring the decisive goal.

That set Flamengo up for a showdown against Pyramids just three days later. The Egyptian side's main advantage was their week's worth of build-up to the game, but they remained the underdogs. They managed to ride the initial wave of Flamengo pressure and quieten the game down, but they only held out for 24 minutes. De Arrascaeta was involved again, whipping a free-kick into the box from out wide for central defender Leo Pereira to head home.

Pyramids gradually grew some threat of their own, led by Mayele their hero of last season. But another De Arrascaeta set-piece after half-time doubled the deficit, this time with Danilo converting the cross to add to the winning goal he scored in the Libertadores final.

Victory in Qatar would have seen Flamengo add a historic world title to their state, national and continental crowns in 2025

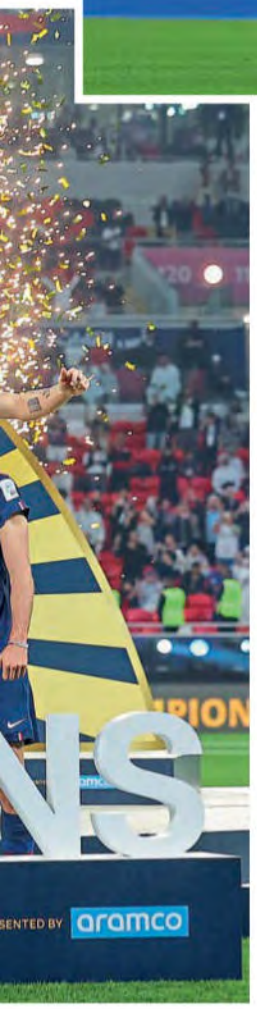
Filipe Luis' side saw out the win, taking *Mengao* to their third intercontinental final, and first not against Liverpool. A Zico-inspired Flamengo beat the Reds 3-0 in the 1981 Intercontinental Cup final, with Jurgen Klopp's side beating them in the 2019 Club World Cup final.

This time their opponents were Paris Saint-Germain, who were making their competition debut on the back of winning their first-ever UEFA Champions League crown. The French side were clear favourites, not least because the European entrants had won these tournaments in 17 of the last 18 years – including Real Madrid in the inaugural edition of this competition in 2024.

The Parisians nearly got off to the perfect start as some panicked play at the back from Flamengo gifted Fabian Ruiz a golden opportunity with an empty net. However, VAR found that the ball had crossed the by-line in the build-up, so PSG only got a corner rather than an opener. Luis Enrique's side continued to impose themselves on the game, with an energetic high press and slick possession play, eventually breaking through in the 38th minute through Khvicha Kvaratskhelia.

Flamengo showed some better intent on the other side of half-time and were rewarded for it after the hour-mark, when Jorginho slotted home a penalty that the ever-dangerous De Arrascaeta won after being tripped in the box. The game then started to open up more as both sides pushed for a winner, leading to a frantic end. PSG firmly returned to the ascendancy as extra-time wore on and their opponents tired, but they couldn't score the decisive goal.

So, the title was to be decided on penalties. After both sides scored their first spot-kicks, a new hero emerged for the European champions. Back-up keeper Matvey Safonov had had precious little to do all game, but he stole the show in the penalty shootout with four consecutive saves. With that, PSG lifted their first intercontinental title and sixth trophy overall in 2025 – an unprecedented achievement for the French giants.



Intercontinental Cup winners...PSG skipper Marquinhos lifts the trophy

Shootout hero... PSG goalkeeper Matvey Safonov

Brazil

TIM VICKERY

Review

Mission accomplished for Flamengo

Rio giants achieve their goal of winning the Brazilian championship

After missing out in the previous four seasons, Flamengo made the league title a priority in 2025, even risking disaster in the group phase of the Copa Libertadores. But it was mission accomplished for the club and for head coach Filipe Luis, who marshalled his resources wisely, especially after a mid-season glut of quality reinforcements. Flamengo had by some distance the best attacking and defensive records, and wrapped up the title with a round to spare, finishing three points ahead of Palmeiras.

It was neck-and-neck until Palmeiras suffered a late wobble. Head coach Abel Ferreira carried out a fine rebuilding job after a disappointing Club World Cup, with Vitor Roque and "Flaco" Lopez forming an effective front pair. But Flamengo beat them home and away – and, in the end, that turned out to be the difference.

Cruzeiro threatened to turn it into a three-horse race, with another Portuguese coach, Leonardo Jardim, enjoying a fine campaign. The club had made some flashy signings, but Jardim largely ignored them, moving Dudo on and leaving Gabriel "Gabi-goal" Barbosa on the bench. He forged a dangerous counter-attacking team, built on the playmaking of former West Bromwich Albion midfielder Matheus Pereira and the sharpness of Kaio Jorge up front. Jardim, though, found the season hard work, and stepped down at the end of the year on a sad note, knocked out of the Brazilian Cup on penalties after "Gabi-goal" had the chance to seal their spot in the final.

But perhaps the most remarkable story of the season was that of Mirassol. From a town in upstate Sao Paulo with a population under 70,000, they were expected to go straight back down after winning promotion in 2024. Instead, they came fourth, and did so playing some wonderful football. Head coach Rafael Guanaes organised his side so well that they often seemed to have more players in action than the

Brazilian champions... Flamengo took the title with a game to spare

Story of the Year ...Mirassol finished fourth on their top-flight debut

opposition. They were a delight to watch, and it will be fascinating to see how they do in 2026, with both the opportunities and the challenges of a Libertadores campaign.

With four teams going down, there was always going to be plenty of drama at the bottom end of the table – where things did not go well for teams from the North East. Sport of Recife won just two matches all campaign, and never had a chance of survival. Juventude from the south soon followed them, leaving the scene for a heart-stopping final day when the other two relegation slots were decided.

The most remarkable story of the season was that of Mirassol. They were expected to go straight back down after winning promotion in 2024. Instead, they came fourth

Fortaleza probably deserved to go down after the unwise mid-season sacking of Juan Pablo Vojvoda, the Argentina coach who had such a great run with the club. Under another Argentine, Martin Palermo, they staged a brave late fight back, only to fall on the final day. And they are joined in the second division by their local rivals Ceara. A solid, defensive side, they spent almost the entire campaign in mid-table comfort. But the closing fixtures looked alarming – their final games were against each of the top four – and Ceara collected just a single point. In the entire year, they were in the relegation zone for the grand total of 29 minutes – the last half hour of the season.

With three North Eastern sides going down, two traditional giants just got away with it. Internacional of Porto Alegre came close to a title win in 2024, and had high hopes going into the year. But they spiralled into crisis. Panic set in, and they brought back head coach Abel Braga, who took them to a Club World Cup triumph back in 2006. A last day win and results elsewhere kept them up – along with Santos.

Tough season... Neymar struggled with injury issues

The great Neymar return proved a huge disappointment. He kept breaking down, and when he was on the pitch he clearly struggled for rhythm, often cutting a frustrated and petulant figure. But he ended the year on a real high. Neymar postponed a minor knee operation to grit his teeth through the final three games where, admittedly against very poor opposition, he tipped the balance at last. With a match-winning performance against Sport Recife and a hat-trick against Juventude, he ensured Santos' survival and gave his World Cup hopes a lifeline.

Also gaining a lifeline were Corinthians, the biggest club in South America's biggest city. Unlike last year, the Sao Paulo giants were never truly in relegation trouble, but 13th place and a four-point cushion from the drop zone gave no cause for celebration. Instead, that came from the Brazilian Cup. On the verge of defeat in the semi-final penalty shootout against Cruzeiro, they battled through to take on Vasco da Gama in the two-legged final. After a goalless draw at home, they went to the Maracana and won 2-1, with Dutchman Memphis Depay sliding home the winner. This is not only a huge morale boost. It also brings a reprieve. Prize money for winning the cup is greater than for the league, and with a Libertadores campaign to look forward to, Corinthians can dream and plan of doing battle on better terms with the likes of Flamengo and local rivals Palmeiras.

SEASON'S BEST

PLAYER OF THE YEAR
Giorgian De Arrascaeta *(Flamengo)*
A constant threat to opposition defenders. Some feared that the Uruguayan playmaker's best days were behind him after 11 straight years of Brazil's gruelling calendar. Instead, he topped the assist charts and was the second top scorer.

Player of the Year... Giorgian De Arrascaeta

COACH OF THE YEAR
Rafael Guanaes *(Mirassol)*
A revelation. Steered a little club in their first top-flight season to a comfortable fourth place and Copa Libertadores qualification, and did it in style. No stars, just a team with all the hallmarks of a well-coached unit. The 44-year-old has a big future.

NEWCOMER OF THE YEAR
Rayan *(Vasco da Gama)*
Tall, skilful and powerful left-footed 19-year-old striker who this year made the transition from right-winger to centre-forward. Scored plenty of goals, turning promise into reality, although needs to work on his back-to-goal game.

Argentina

JOEL RICHARDS

Estudiantes win Clausura amid controversial season

La Plata giants win the Clausura crown despite the suspension of their compelling club president Juan Sebastian Veron

Amid the chaotic celebrations in the stands, the television cameras remained fixed on Juan Sebastian Veron. Estudiantes' club president was celebrating as one of the faithful, wearing his six-month suspension from the Argentina Football Association (AFA) like a badge of honour.

Argentina's Clausura 2025 final pitched Estudiantes de La Plata against Racing Club. Both sides had had to prioritise the domestic prize after each being knocked out of the Copa Libertadores by eventual winners Flamengo.

There were only glimmers of quality in the match. Racing forward Adrian Martinez's brilliant chip in the 80th minute appeared to have given *La Academia* the title late on. Then came the drama, with ex-Southampton striker Guido Carrillo's last-gasp equaliser sending the match to extra-time.

El Pincha went on to triumph 5-4 on penalties. "That is the history of this club," said Carrillo afterwards. "When everything seems over, when people think we're finished, Estudiantes rise again." It was the club's first league title in 15 years, adding to the 2023 Copa Argentina, 2024 Copa de la Liga, and 2024 Trofeo de Campeones. Barely days later, a first brace since 2020 from striker Lucas Alario secured another trophy – the 2025 Trofeo de Campeones – as Estudiantes, Clausura champions,

defeated Apertura winners Platense.

For coach Eduardo Dominguez it was a fifth title at the club, surpassing the tallies of Carlos Bilardo and Alejandro Sabella in the club's history.

This Estudiantes side may not have steamrolled its way past all-comers, but the club's stance on events off the pitch echoed the feelings of many supporters across Argentina. Their two trophies this year were a vindication of that posture.

In November, the AFA decided to award Rosario Central a title as the 2025 "League Champions" – the club with most points won in the calendar year across both the Apertura and Clausura campaigns. This is a trophy that had never existed before, and the decision prompted outcry.

"The team deserved it for two spectacular seasons," said Angel Di Maria, skilfully sidestepping the controversy surrounding the prize. The World Cup winner has been in sensational form since returning to Rosario. He posed with the trophy along with club directors and manager Ariel Holan, but the smiles were short-lived as the controversy escalated.

> "That is the history of this club. When everything seems over, when people think we're finished, Estudiantes rise again"
>
> Estudiantes' Clausura final goalscorer Guido Carrillo

The AFA instructed Central's next opponents Estudiantes to form a guard of honour for the "champions" in their following match. Veron consulted his senior players, and the club took a decision. The Estudiantes squad did form the guard of honour – but turned their backs as the Central players, led by Di Maria, took to the pitch. For this act of defiance, the players involved received two-match bans starting from next season, but the AFA suspended Veron from all football-related activity for six months.

Veron is a deity in La Plata. During his playing career, he returned to the club after a formidable decade in Europe to follow in his father's footsteps by guiding Estudiantes to a Libertadores title in 2009. He is now club president. This ban elevates *La Brujita's* status to that of the rebel, the disruptive figure in Argentine football.

"Argentine football should be one of the top five leagues in the world," he said on local television as the dust was still settling. "We need fewer teams, a more logical championship, better refereeing, and fewer titles." The Argentine first division currently has 30 teams. In 2025, six separate titles were awarded for various cups, super cups and leagues.

"When I returned in 2006," Veron noted, "you played against everyone." At that time, the first division was a 20-team league with two short tournaments per year. "Now there are some teams we haven't played in three years."

From off-the-pitch volatility, there continues to be on-the-pitch struggles. This was laid bare by another year of playing second fiddle to the Brazilians in the Libertadores, although Lanus were triumphant in the secondary continental title, the Copa Sudamericana. Racing were unfortunate to end the campaign without a trophy, having reached the semi-finals of the Libertadores and the final of the Clausura. The side seemed to have lost fifth gear from 2024 when they won the Sudamericana crown.

River Plate suffered a disastrous season under Marcelo Gallardo, compounded by losing the *Superclasico* to Boca Juniors, crashing out of the Libertadores in the quarter-finals, and falling to eventual winners Independiente Rivadavia in the semi-finals of the Copa Argentina. Their city rivals Boca's year was also defined by crashing out of the Libertadores – in the qualifying round – and then by the passing of their beloved manager, Miguel Angel Russo.

SEASON'S BEST

PLAYER OF THE SEASON
Angel Di Maria *(Rosario Central)*
Delivered moments of magic on his return to Rosario – from a brilliant free-kick against arch-rivals Newell's Old Boys to a goal direct from a corner against Boca Juniors. The World Cup winner brought aura and class, despite the controversy of Central's title.

Player of the Season... Angel Di Maria

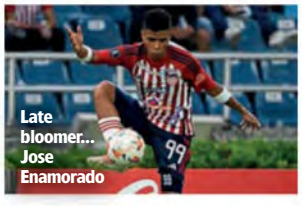
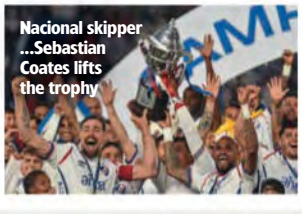
NEWCOMER OF THE SEASON
Facundo Cambeses *(Racing)*
At 28, he is an old "newcomer", but in only his third-ever season as a top-flight No.1, Cambeses earned an international call-up after top-class performances that carried *La Academia* to the Copa Libertadores semi-finals and Clausura final.

COACH OF THE SEASON
Eduardo Dominguez *(Estudiantes)*
"The Beard" led Estudiantes to two pieces of silverware, finding form and showing their mettle when it mattered. He is now only behind legendary Osvaldo Zubeldia as the most successful coach in Estudiantes' history.

Estudiantes club president...Veron watched the Clausura final with the fans

"League Champions" ...Rosario Central were controversially honoured for 2025

	HOW THE LEAGUE WAS WON	CONTINENTAL QUALIFIERS	PLAYER OF THE YEAR
Bolivia DIVISION PROFESIONAL	The 16 teams play a home-and-away league, with **Always Ready** finishing three points ahead of Bolivar. After a couple of titles in the amateur era, and a win in the COVID-truncated season of 2020, this stands as the El Alto club's finest achievement.	**Libertadores:** Always Ready and Bolivar **Qualifying rounds:** Nacional Potosi and The Strongest **Sudamericana:** San Antonio, Blooming, Independiente Petrolero and Guabira	**Hector Cuellar** (Always Ready) Strong central midfielder who sits in front of the defence, providing balance to an attacking, free-scoring side. Also an important part of the young Bolivia squad that is still hoping to make the World Cup through the play-offs.
Chile LIGA DE PRIMERA	The season was a massive triumph for **Coquimbo Unido**. The "Pirates" from 200 miles up the coast from Santiago won their first title with remarkable ease, wrapping things up with four matchdays to spare and finishing 17 points clear at the top of a 16-team league.	**Libertadores:** Coquimbo Unido and Universidad Catolica **Qualifying rounds:** O'Higgins and Huachipato **Sudamericana:** Universidad de Chile, Audax Italiano, Palestino and Cobresal	**Leonardo Valencia** (Audax Italiano) Veteran attacking midfielder, an international in 2016-17, who had a storming season with one of the league's top-scoring teams. Scored 15 and assisted nine – no player had a hand in more goals.
Colombia PRIMERA A	The 20 teams play two separate championships a year, both followed by an eight-team play-off leading to a two-legged final. Santa Fe won the Apertura, and the Finalizacion went to **Junior** of Barranquilla, who overcame Tolima 4-0 on aggregate.	**Libertadores:** Santa Fe and Junior **Qualifying rounds:** Deportes Tolima and Independiente Medellin **Sudamericana:** Atletico Nacional, America de Cali, Atletico Bucaramanga and Millonarios	**Jose Enamorado** (Junior) Diminutive winger who can also play through the middle. A late developer who recently turned 27, he blossomed delightfully in the Finalizacion – especially in the final where he scored three of his side's four goals.
Ecuador SERIE A	There was a new format this year: a 16-team league phase followed by a mini-league for the top six, who retained their points. In the end it was a comfortable win for **Independiente del Valle**, their second title and consolation for two silver medals in a row.	**Libertadores:** Independiente del Valle and Liga de Quito (LDU) **Qualifying rounds:** Barcelona and Universidad Catolica **Sudamericana:** Orense, Libertad, Macara and Deportivo Cuenca	**Claudio Spinelli** (Independiente del Valle) The Argentine striker, now playing in the seventh country of his career, had the season of his life. Dynamic, bustling figure who gave the champions a potent spearhead and 20 league goals.
Paraguay COPA DE PRIMERA	The 12 teams play two separate league campaigns. Libertad won the Apertura but then slumped in the Clausura, as did traditional giants Olimpia – whose suffering was amplified by watching rivals **Cerro Porteno** win the title by a point ahead of Guarani.	**Libertadores:** Cerro Porteno and Libertad **Qualifying rounds:** Guarani and 2 de Mayo **Sudamericana:** Sportivo Trinidense, Nacional, Recoleta and Olimpia	**Blas Riveros** (Cerro Porteno) Little left-back who left Olimpia in 2016, bound for Switzerland, Denmark and Argentina, before returning home for a storming few months with Cerro Porteno, good enough for a league title and a recall to the national team.
Peru LIGA 1	The 19 teams play two separate championships. **Universitario** won them both, by a margin of two and four points respectively, ensuring that there was no need for the usual end-of-season play-off. It was their 29th title, and their third in a row.	**Libertadores:** Universitario and Cusco **Qualifying rounds:** Sporting Cristal and Alianza Lima **Sudamericana:** Alianza Atletico, Melgar, Deportivo Garcilaso and Cienciano	**Jairo Concha** (Universitario) A frustratingly inconsistent player who enjoyed his best campaign. Wiry, 26-year-old attacking midfielder who came through the ranks at San Martin before joining Alianza Lima and then crossing town in 2024 to the champions.
Uruguay PRIMERA DIVISION	The 16 teams play a convoluted format, with two championships and a mini one in the middle. The two winners play-off to reach a two-legged final against the side with the most points over the year. Penarol saw off Liverpool, then lost 3-2 to **Nacional** in the final.	**Libertadores:** Nacional and Penarol **Qualifying rounds:** Liverpool and Juventud **Sudamericana:** Defensor, Boston River, Racing and Montevideo City Torque	**Abel Hernandez** (Liverpool) Veteran international and one-time Premier League striker with Hull City, Hernandez enjoyed an excellent campaign as the tall, left-footed spearhead of the club from Belvedere that once again punched well above its weight.
Venezuela LIGA FUTVE	The 14 teams play two separate championships – both with league phases followed by play-offs – before the two winners meet in a two-legged final. Just like in the cup, **Universidad Central** beat Carabobo in the final to secure their first-ever domestic double.	**Libertadores:** Universidad Central and Deportivo La Guaira **Qualifying rounds:** Carabobo and Deportivo Tachira **Sudamericana:** Academia Puerto Cabello, Monagas, Caracas and Metropolitanos	**Juan Camilo Zapata** (Universidad Central) Experienced Colombian support striker, at his best flitting around a centre-forward. Enjoyed an excellent season in his fourth campaign in Venezuela with his second club in the country.

COACH OF THE YEAR		NEWCOMER OF THE YEAR	LIBERTADORES RECORD
Julio Cesar Baldivieso (Always Ready) A talented attacking midfielder in Bolivia's 1994 World Cup side. In an interesting coaching career, he has managed Bolivia, Palestine and a whole host of local clubs. This, his second title, is special.	Player of the Year ...Hector Cuellar	**Fernando Nava** (Oriente Pertolero) Tall, strong, right-footed winger, able to play on either flank. Came through the ranks at Athletico Paranaense and then Santos in Brazil. Back in the national squad after returning home this year.	A year to forget. For the first time since 2022, no team made it through to the knockout stages. Although visiting opponents fear the altitude at which some of the leading Bolivian teams play, that was not enough in 2025.
Esteban Gonzalez (Coquimbo Unido) Led his club's unexpected triumph by building a disciplined, hard-working side with a fine defensive record. First Chilean coach to win the title since 2016, but now moves to Queretaro in Mexico.	Under-20s star...Ian Garguez	**Ian Garguez** (Palestino) The 20-year-old has featured at right-back for his club but played centre-back for Chile U20s, where he was a rare success in the side that hosted the World Cup in the autumn. Has since been fast-tracked into the senior squad.	Another disappointing season, especially for 2024 league champions Colo-Colo in their centenary year. For the eighth time in 11 years, no Chilean side made it out of the group phase.
Alejandro Restrepo (Independiente Medellin) It was a frustrating year for a club who were in contention for both championships and the cup but ended the season empty-handed. It was the product of good work from an up-and-coming coach.	 Late bloomer... Jose Enamorado	**Jordan Garcia** (Fortaleza) As well as making his top-flight breakthrough, the 20-year-old goalkeeper was also excellent for Colombia's U20s in the South American Championship and the World Cup. Calm and athletic, he has moved to Mexican side Leon.	Continue to underachieve. There has been no serious challenge since Atletico Nacional won the title in 2016. Nacional made it out of the group this time, and were unlucky to be knocked out in the second round, but Colombian football should be doing better.
Diego Martinez (Universidad Catolica) Before this year, Martinez, 38, was seen as a youth specialist. But he handled an experienced squad with great skill, steering them to victory in the cup, the club's greatest-ever triumph.	Nomadic striker... Claudio Spinelli	**Darwin Guagua** (Independiente del Valle) Whippy figure who can operate wide on the right, but is perhaps better when attacking the space a few metres infield. Made headlines by playing for Ecuador before making his club debut.	After a disappointing 2024, Ecuador returned to being the surprise success story of South American football, with LDU knocking out two Brazilian sides on their way to the semi-finals – where they came close to eliminating Palmeiras.
Felipe Gonzalez (2 de Mayo) Took the club from Pedro Juan Caballero back to the top flight for the first time in 15 years, but resigned in April after a bad start, then came back in August to secure qualification for their first Libertadores. A rollercoaster ride.	Title winners...Cerro Porteno players lift the trophy	**Alexandro Maidana** (Guarani) Left-sided defender, capable of playing in the centre or at full-back, who enjoyed a splendid debut season in the top flight for the league's runners-up, and also performed well for Paraguay in the Under-20 World Cup.	After a barren 2024 it was back to business as usual, with the clubs from Paraguay punching above their weight and two of them reaching the last 16. Both Cerro Porteno and Libertad fell in the first knockout round, but came close to the quarter-finals.
Jorge Fossati (Universitario) Universitario hadn't won a title in a decade when the Uruguayan took over in 2023. Built a rugged side that won the league title, and they retained it after he left to coach Peru. Returned to more triumph in 2025 but now steps down again.	Returning hero... Jorge Fossati	**Ian Wisdom** (Sporting Cristal) Neat, give-and-go midfielder who has been making good progress for a while. Played for Peru's U23s at the start of 2024, but truly made his breakthrough in the following year, consolidating himself as a regular first teamer.	A positive year as Alianza Lima eliminated Boca Juniors in the qualifiers and then Universitario became the first Peruvian side to make it out of the group phase since 2013. This was a morale boost, even if they were soon dispatched in the knockouts.
Jadson Viera (Boston River/Nacional) Brazilian former centre-back who has been in Uruguay since 2011. Earned Sudamericana qualification for Boston River in his first head coach role, then joined Nacional for the final stages of the title win.	 Nacional skipper ...Sebastian Coates lifts the trophy	**Nahuel Herrera** (Penarol) 21-year-old centre-back who made a big impression in his first full season. Commanding in the air and proactive on the ground where he seeks to be first to the ball, he also loves to surge forward and launch counter attacks.	There was no repeat of last year, when Penarol made it all the way to the semi-finals – Uruguay's first since 2014. This time Penarol did manage to make it out of the group phase, but fell to Racing of Argentina in the first knockout round.
Daniel Sasso (Universidad Central) The double was a splendid prize for a former youth coach who first took charge of the club in 2021, resigned a year later, then came back in 2023. Gave Corinthians a fright in the Libertadores qualifiers.	Impressive coach... Daniel Sasso	**Lewuis Pena** (Metropolitanos) Breakthrough season for this direct right-footed left-winger who spent some time in Poland. Returned to Caracas, but it was after the July move to Metropolitanos that he began to pick up momentum that he hopes will carry into 2026.	A series of narrow defeats. The clubs weren't humiliated, but the two who played the group phase could only manage one draw and 11 defeats. It was the eighth year in a row with no representative in the knockout rounds. ***Compiled by Tim Vickery***

United States

JAMES NALTON

Inter Miami MLS champions at last

Club of David Beckham and Lionel Messi finally get their hands on the MLS Cup

Review

Champions at last...Lionel Messi lifts the MLS Cup

Inter Miami finally got the trophy they craved. The one they targeted when they signed Lionel Messi towards the end of 2023. The one the owners, David Beckham and the Mas brothers, Jorge and Jose, have coveted since the franchise's formation in 2018 and its debut season in 2020.

Winning the MLS Cup play-offs, defeating Canadian team Vancouver Whitecaps in the final, meant Miami were crowned champions for 2025 – their sixth season in the league. It also meant that two legends of the game, Jordi Alba and Sergio Busquets, bowed out on a high in the final game of their playing careers.

Inter Miami had topped the overall league table in the previous season, claiming the 2024 Supporters' Shield for doing so, but the team crowned MLS champions is the one that wins the post-season play-offs.

Philadelphia Union topped the overall league table in the regular season in 2025, taking Inter Miami's Supporters' Shield title. But as was the case when the Union won the Shield in 2020, and when they topped the Eastern Conference in 2022, they failed to follow up a strong league campaign in the play-offs, this time knocked out by New York City FC.

In the build-up to the play-offs, it looked primed for a star-studded West-v-East clash in the final between Los Angeles FC and Inter Miami, Son Heung-min v Messi. LAFC had been in great form since Son's arrival in August, while Inter Miami had to put everything into the play-offs, having failed to win anything else in 2025.

In the end, MLS did get its big cross-conference matchup, but instead of Son's LAFC it was Thomas Muller's Vancouver Whitecaps that made the final. The Caps defeated LAFC on penalties along the way, repeating the successful cup run they had made to the CONCACAF Champions Cup final earlier in the year.

The Whitecaps also knocked out impressive newcomers San Diego FC, who had topped the Western Conference in style in their first season in the league. With Muller on board, there was talk that the Caps could go one better than they did in CONCACAF competition and cause an upset in MLS.

Inter Miami's star power gave them the cutting edge in key moments

Yet for the way much of the final went, a win for the Canadians wouldn't have been considered an upset at all. They were the best team for most of it, forcing Inter Miami goalkeeper Rocco Rios Novo into several key saves, and at one point seeing the ball hit the post three times within a matter of seconds. A shot from Emmanuel Sabbi hit both posts before bouncing out, and in the ensuing scrap for the rebound between Ali Ahmed and Maxi Falcon, the ball hit the post again before going out of play.

Still, despite Vancouver Whitecaps' dominance for large spells, Inter Miami's star power gave them the cutting edge in key moments.

The Canadian side conceded an unfortunate own goal early on when Tadeo Allende saw a cross deflect in off Edier Ocampo, but when Vancouver got one back through Ahmed in the second half, it looked like the Whitecaps would go on to win it.

But then Messi intervened. First, he stole the ball in midfield to slip in Rodrigo De Paul for the go-ahead goal, and then provided a second excellent assist for Allende to finish the job.

The final goal was not quite the moment of unadulterated joy that it might have been. In the build-up, Alba had played the ball to Messi, but the action of the pass caused him to fall to the floor. As the ball found the back of the net, coach Javier Mascherano charged onto the pitch towards the prone Alba, in emotional scenes for the left-back's last-ever game.

For all the glamour and expectation that surrounds Miami, getting the job done was a big deal, and it showed on the faces of the players. Luis Suarez, benched for much of the play-offs in favour of more dynamism around Messi, hugged an emotional Alba, while Busquets, at 37, only missed one game all season.

Messi was named MLS Cup MVP and, a few days later, was confirmed as the league's overall MVP for 2025, receiving over 70% of the vote. Allende also deserves a mention for his form in the play-offs, setting a new record for his nine post-season goals.

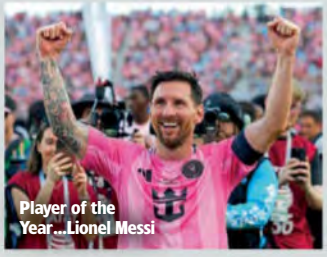
Several other players had campaigns that, in normal, non-Messi years, would have been considered historic MLS seasons. San Diego's Anders Dreyer scored 19 goals and made 17 assists in the regular season, adding four more goals in the play-offs, while Evander of FC Cincinnati and Denis Bouanga of LAFC also had seasons that put them in the top ten in league history for goals and assists combined.

But these Messi-era seasons are not normal years and, having signed a contract extension to the end of 2028, there might be a few more to come.

SEASON'S BEST

MANAGER OF THE YEAR
Bradley Carnell *(Philadelphia Union)*
Few predicted the Union would even make the play-offs, but they topped the Eastern Conference and overall table with the coaching of South African Carnell, formerly of St Louis City, proving a perfect fit.

PLAYER OF THE YEAR
Lionel Messi *(Inter Miami)*
An unsurprising choice, but the numbers speak for themselves: Messi's play-off performances took his 2025 MLS tally to 35 goals and 23 assists in 34 games, including two vitally important assists in the MLS Cup final.



Player of the Year...Lionel Messi

NEWCOMER OF THE YEAR
Anders Dreyer *(San Diego FC)*
In any other year, this was MVP-level output as the winger led San Diego to top spot of the Western Conference in their maiden season. The Dane, signed from Belgian side Anderlecht, outshone his fellow Designated Player Hirving Lozano.

Signing off...the MLS Cup final was Sergio Busquets and Jordi Alba's last-ever game

Silver medallists... Thomas Muller and his team-mates at the final whistle

Mexico

MARTIN DEL PALACIO LANGER

Review

Toluca make it two in a row

Talismanic Red Devils captain Alexis Vega returns just in time to fire his side to their second league victory of 2025

The 2025 Apertura tournament was the most evenly balanced since the introduction of the biannual short-format competitions in Mexico's Liga MX. But in the end, the champion was the expected one and the one who deserved it the most.

In Mexico there are five clubs with a budget far superior to the rest – America, Cruz Azul, Tigres UANL, Monterrey and Toluca – and any of them can beat the other on a good day. For that reason, despite Toluca managing to retain the majority of their squad that won the 2025 Clausura title, repeating the triumph would prove difficult.

Vital save...Tigres' Angel Correa sees his penalty kept out by Toluca goalkeeper Luis Garcia

Iconic captain... Toluca talisman Alexis Vega lifts the league trophy

Decisive moment...Alexis Vega wheels away in celebration after his title-winning spot-kick for Toluca

At first, that seemed to be the case. After defeats against Tigres and Cruz Azul, a draw at home to Pumas UNAM, and elimination from the Leagues Cup – the tournament that brings together Liga MX and Major League Soccer teams – at the hands of Orlando City, Toluca supporters were on alert.

From then on, though, they didn't lose again. They finished the regular season with eight wins and three draws, enough to qualify for the play-offs in first place, which guaranteed them playing all their knockout round tie second legs at home and progressing in the event of an aggregate draw. That advantage became even more important when it seemed apparent that they would have to play without their star man, Alexis Vega.

The Mexican international forward has one of the most interesting stories in Liga MX. Developed at Toluca, Vega left the club during a difficult period in 2018 in a $9 million transfer to the most popular team in the country, Chivas Guadalajara, where he quickly became their best player.

> With ten minutes left of normal time, Alexis Vega made his return. It was later revealed that he was not fully fit to play

However, Vega's time in Guadalajara was constantly marred by indiscipline and he returned to Toluca in January 2024. After a first year of ups and downs, he took the league by storm the following season. He was, by a considerable margin, the best player of the Clausura 2025, and he was still performing at an exceptional level when he went down with a muscle injury during the penultimate matchday of the 2025 Apertura.

Even without their main superstar, Toluca still had a high-quality squad featuring Mexico internationals Marcel Ruiz and Jesus Gallardo, Argentine midfielder Nicolas Castro, Uruguayan defender Federico Pereira, Brazilian winger Helinho and Portuguese striker Paulinho, the league's top scorer. As a result, nobody was surprised when they eliminated the team that finished eighth in the table, Juarez, in the quarter-finals.

The semi-finals were a different story. There their opponents were Monterrey, another high-budget side, with a squad that included Spaniards Sergio Ramos, Oliver Torres and Sergio Canales. Toluca went through, but only after suffering, including a 1-0 first-leg defeat. In the end, the tie finished 3-3 on aggregate, and they progressed solely because of their higher position in the table.

That advantage would not be given to them in the final, though, where they took on league runners-up Tigres. At this stage, extra-time and penalties would be used as the tie-breaker in the event of a draw – and that is exactly how it played out.

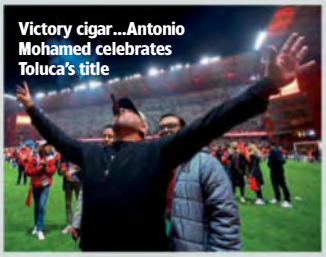
In the first leg, Tigres took a narrow 1-0 home lead, largely thanks to an outstanding performance by their keeper, the Argentine Nahuel Guzman.

In the second leg, in front of a packed home crowd, Toluca fell further behind in the 14th minute, but did not panic. After a spectacular goal from Helinho in the 40th minute, Paulinho drew them level shortly after half-time.

SEASON'S BEST

PLAYER OF THE SEASON
Alexis Vega *(Toluca)*
While not quite in the scintillating form of the previous campaign, he was still the champions' top player and the league's most creative star with nine assists.

MANAGER OF THE SEASON
Antonio Mohamed *(Toluca)*
The Argentine coach has now won five league titles with four different Liga MX sides having previously led Tijuana, America and Monterrey to glory.



Victory cigar...Antonio Mohamed celebrates Toluca's title

NEWCOMER OF THE SEASON
Joao Pedro *(Atletico San Luis)*
The Brazilian-born former Italy striker arrived in Mexico from Hull City with little fanfare, and went on to finish as the regular season's joint top scorer with 12 goals.

Then it happened. With ten minutes left of normal time, Vega made his return. It was later revealed that he was not fully fit to play, but an injection in his leg allowed him to play out the remainder of normal time and a tense, goalless period of extra-time.

What followed was one of the strangest penalty shootouts in Liga MX history. Nicolas Ibanez missed the first penalty for Tigres and Pereira missed the third spot-kick for Toluca, but from that point on 12 consecutive penalties were scored. Brazilian centre-back Joaquim missed for the visitors in sudden death, but that proved to be the first of five consecutive failures, including penalties taken by both goalkeepers.

Finally, after Tigres' Argentine star Angel Correa had seen his penalty saved by Toluca keeper Luis Garcia, it was Vega's turn to step up. Having already scored with Toluca's first kick, nobody had any doubts about what would happen next. It seemed written that the injured forward would decide the title – and that is exactly what he did, with his usual composure, sending Guzman the wrong way to give his team a second consecutive championship.

Japan

MIKE PLASTOW

Antlers edge epic title race

Kashima Antlers and Kashiwa Reysol take battle for J. League down to the wire

Kashima Antlers won a record ninth J. League title but their first since 2016 on the final day of the 2025 season. Their triumph was also a record fifth league win for coach Toru Oniki, a former Antlers player, in his first season in charge of his old club.

Antlers' standout players included new Brazilian signing Leo Ceara, the league's top scorer with 21 goals, and veteran Japan centre-back Naomichi Ueda marshalling the back-line. Ueda, Kento Misao and Yuma Suzuki were all part of the Antlers team that won their last league title in 2016. There was also Kei Chinen, who won the league four times under Oniki at Kawasaki Frontale, and J. League Player of the Year Tomoki Hayakawa, superb all season in goal.

The gap was razor-thin at the finish with Antlers and Kashiwa Reysol both in the hunt until the final day. For Antlers, it was a season of two halves, blowing hot and cold at the start but relentless by the finish. They lost 1-0 at Shonan Bellmare on the opening day before bouncing back immediately with four straight wins. In March, they even set a new J1 record of 26 home games without defeat – a run that included the entire 2024 season – but ended at 27 in April. Conversely, three straight losses in April, then again from June into July, left them with some catching up to do. Antlers tightened up, played a generally cagey but always determined game, and never lost again, home or away, in their last 15 league outings.

Kashiwa Reysol, a point behind at the finish, seemed unlikely title contenders at the start after avoiding relegation by just a single place in each of the previous two seasons. In 2025, by contrast, they lost only five times in total, the league's fewest, and never twice in a row. Their quick-pressing, high-possession, tight-passing game kept every opponent on the back foot and was consistently a joy to watch.

The miracle was wrought by the arrival of Spanish manager Ricardo Rodriguez from Wuhan Three Towns in the Chinese Super League. Rodriguez was already a J. League veteran after stints at Tokushima Vortis from 2016

Top scorer...Antlers striker Leo Ceara (L) arrived from Cerezo Osaka in January 2025

to 2020 and Urawa Red Diamonds from 2021 to 2022. For Reysol, though, drawing too many matches hurt their chances, and the decisive losses were the two head-to-heads with Antlers, 3-1 away in March and 3-2 at home in July. In retrospect, those six-pointers made all the difference to the title race.

The race was thrilling throughout.

> The title race was thrilling throughout. By mid-August, with only a quarter of the season remaining, only two points separated the top six

By mid-August, with only a quarter of the season remaining, only two points separated the top six: Kyoto Sanga, Antlers, Reysol, Machida Zelvia, Sanfrecce Hiroshima and Vissel Kobe. Only as the weather began to cool down from September did Antlers and Reysol leave the chasing pack behind.

Runners-up...Kashiwa Reysol pushed Kashima Antlers all the way in the J. League title race

Kyoto Sanga, who ended in third, also seemed unlikely title contenders. Their best previous finish, fifth place, was all the way back in 2002. But manager Cho Kwi-jae, now in his fifth year at the helm, produced some of the league's finest attacking football led by the hard work and consummate finishing of Rafael Elias, joint-second in the scoring rankings with 18 goals. Injury to Elias towards the finish possibly cost Kyoto dear but the lasting impression remained of an extraordinary team effort.

Sanfrecce Hiroshima, fourth, won the Super Cup 2-0 against Vissel at the start and the League Cup 3-1 against Reysol at the finish. Vissel Kobe, double winners in 2024, stuck to their earlier winning formula but won no trophies this time and were fifth. Manager Takayuki Yoshida took responsibility for that disappointment by standing down at the end of the season.

Machida Zelvia, in only their second season in the top flight, were the other big story. As well as finishing sixth, they also lifted their first major trophy, the Emperor's Cup, with a 3-1 win against Vissel in November's final. Their triumph was a dream come true worthy of a Japanese soccer manga for Zelvia boss Go Kuroda, who spent 36 years as a high school teacher before taking over at Zelvia in 2023. After the final, he spoke of having based his pre-game pep talk on his experiences of victory and defeat at schoolboy finals. It clearly worked with Zelvia going ahead after just six minutes and never looking back.

At the foot of the table, Albirex Niigata and Shonan Bellmare looked doomed from the start, leaving the final relegation spot to be fought over by local rivals Yokohama F. Marinos and Yokohama FC. It was the bigger club, F. Marinos, who reached escape velocity by winning six of their last nine games. Mito Hollyhock, V-Varen Nagasaki and JEF United Chiba, the latter via the play-offs, were promoted from J2.

This was the J. League's last calendar-year season with the next full, 2026-27 campaign, scheduled to kick off in August. In the interim, a special tournament will be played from February to June with the teams divided into East and West divisions and the winners joining Antlers and Reysol in the AFC Champions League Elite for 2026-27. Zelvia will play in the AFC Champions League Two as Emperor's Cup winners. The J. League also plans to inaugurate a new Under-21 league for the 2026-27 season.

SEASON'S BEST

MANAGER OF THE YEAR
Toru Oniki *(Kashima Antlers)*
Still only 51, Oniki extended his own record as the J. League's most successful manager by leading Antlers to their first league championship in nine years, having previously won four with Kawasaki Frontale.

PLAYER OF THE YEAR
Tomoki Hayakawa
(Kashima Antlers)
Hayakawa's acrobatic saves, speed and impeccable timing saved Antlers time and again on their way to the title. He also broke into the national team in 2025 and now looks set to be at least Japan's second-choice goalkeeper for the World Cup.

BEST YOUNG PLAYER
Ryunosuke Sato
(Fagiano Okayama)
The lively teenage winger was a revelation on loan at Fagiano in their first season in J1. The two previous winners of the J. League's Best Young Player award (Kota Takai and Shunsuke Mito) were both snapped up by European clubs, and Sato, on FC Tokyo's books, could well follow them.

Player of the Year...Hayakawa made his Japan debut in 2025

Asia

JOHN DUERDEN

5 Things...

...from Asian football

1 JORDAN END A GOOD YEAR ON A HIGH

Jordan qualified for a first World Cup in June and, in December, reached the final of the FIFA Arab Cup, cementing their reputation as a serious player in Asia. Well-organised, hard-working and hard to beat, the men from Amman conceded just two goals in their first five games in Qatar, and comfortably topped a group featuring the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Kuwait (full results and group standings on page 98).

In the knockout rounds came hugely satisfying victories over Iraq and Saudi Arabia, both by a single goal to nil. The final was a 3-2 defeat at the hands of Morocco but coach Jamal Sellami was satisfied with the tournament. It was not just the results but winning tense knockout-round games in front of big crowds –40,000 in the quarter-final and 60,000 in the semis.

The one downside was the cruciate ligament injury suffered by star striker Yazan Al Naimat, which could put his place at this summer's World Cup extravaganza in jeopardy.

2 CHINESE CONTINENTAL STRUGGLES CONTINUE

There are three Chinese teams in the AFC Champions League Elite but that may not be the case for much longer if they don't get their collective acts together. As the year ended, the trio occupied the bottom three places with a combined total of just two wins from 18 games.

Shanghai Port are bottom and have not tasted victory at all, a disappointing performance from the team that have won the last three Chinese Super League titles. Port coach Kevin Muscat has won championships in Australia, Japan and China but a lack of success on the continental stage is a blot on that impressive résumé. Shanghai Shenhua and Chengdu Rongcheng are not faring much better. China have fallen behind regional rivals with clubs from Malaysia and Thailand performing better.

Shanghai slump...Kevin Muscat's Port currently sit bottom of their Asian Champions League group

3 POYET'S SOUTH KOREAN DOUBLE SUCCESS MARRED BY CONTROVERSY

Gus Poyet enjoyed a stellar first year in charge of Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors but it is only going to be one season as the Uruguayan left South Korea in December. He took the Greens to a tenth K-League title (fans and media had been waiting for "*La Decima*" since 2021) and also ended by lifting the cup.

Finalists...Jordan players celebrate after beating Saudi Arabia in the Arab Cup semi-finals

Struggling... Shanghai Shenhua aren't faring much better than Port

The triumphs were overshadowed, however, by controversy. In a November game against Daejeon Hana Citizen, the referee reported Poyet's assistant coach Mauricio Taricco for what he perceived to be a racist gesture following protests against a penalty decision. The Argentine said that he put his fingers to his eyes to implore the official to be more observant. The K-League took the ref's side and issued a five-match ban, and Taricco resigned in response. Most fans sympathise with the former Tottenham Hotspur, Ipswich Town and Brighton full-back, saying that pictures are ambiguous at best.

In a statement on Jeonbuk's website, Taricco said: "I have worked with many people in many countries and have lived and socialised with them without any problems related to their culture or race.

"My life, regardless of nationality and race, must continue in a place where there is safety, respect, peace, and equality before the law as a football person, so with a heavy heart, I have decided to leave this place after the end of this season."

Poyet, the only foreign boss in the top tier last season, soon followed and what should have been a great K-League story became something else.

4 TRACTOR FLY THE FLAG FOR IRAN

Iranian clubs were unable to compete financially with Saudi Arabian rivals even before the big four in Riyadh and Jeddah were taken over by the Public Investment Fund (PIF) and started spending lavishly on famous foreign stars.

Even so, an Asian powerhouse as proud as Iran having only one representative in the continent's top tier competition seems a little wrong. Tehran giants Persepolis and Esteghlal were absent for this season's AFC Champions League Elite and so it was left to Tractor SC, fresh off winning a first Persian Gulf Pro League title, to fly the flag. Yet this team from Tabriz, in the northwest corner of the country and founded by Iran's premier tractor manufacturers, has been something of a revelation. Helped by a crack defence in front of Iran international goalkeeper Alireza Beiranvand conceding just two goals in six games, they became the second team after Saudi giants Al Hilal to book their place in the round of 16.

5 ASIAN NATIONS LEAGUE IS BORN

On December 21, just 24 hours after the Confederation of African Football announced the formation of a Nations League, the Asian Football Confederation did the same. There has been talk of this for years and, suddenly, it was here. There were no details given – the AFC promised information about format, implementation and the rest, in due course – but the intention is there.

Most of Asia's teams need more games against teams at a similar level. The lowest-ranked nations barely play due to the vagaries of World Cup qualification. More structured competition can only be a good thing. The mid-ranking teams should also benefit, though there are questions about how to deal with the distances involved.

The ones at the top however, especially the eastern giants of Japan and South Korea, are less keen. Playing even more games against continental opposition is not on their wish list – what they want is European, African or South American tests whenever possible. Yet with other confederations having Nations Leagues of their own – UEFA and CONCACAF's formats have been in existence since 2018 and are thriving – this is becoming more difficult.

Flying the flag...fans of Iranian side Tractor watch their team in the AFC Champions League Elite

Kiribati

STEVE MENARY

Football on the islands...football is Kiribati's only national sport

Putting Kiribati on the football map

Kiribati's football association is aiming to reconnect with the rest of the footballing world

After years of isolation, the Pacific island of Kiribati is trying to re-engage with the international community with the ambition of becoming a full member of the Oceania Football Confederation (OFC).

Football is the only national sport on Kiribati, which has a population of nearly 140,000 people spread across 32 islands and atolls. The Kiribati Islands Football Association (KIFA) was founded in 1980 and has member associations on 23 islands, with one or more clubs on each, and organises nine junior and adult tournaments.

The most recent event, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry Championship, finished in November with 26 clubs from nine islands entering and Dijoren from South Tarawa beating SB Rainbow from Betio 3-2 in the final.

Kiribati's international experiences, however, have been sporadic and largely frustrated by red tape.

Kiribati first entered the football competition at the Pacific Games in 1979 but did not return until 2003. Two years later, Kiribati applied to join FIFA. As a fully independent country, Kiribati is eligible, but the bid was rejected due to KIFA not being a member of any international confederation.

In 2007, KIFA joined the OFC as an associate member and later tried again to join FIFA but was once more rejected. In 2011, Kiribati made their third appearance at the Pacific Games and another winless campaign finished with a 17-1 thrashing by Tahiti.

Pacific Games... Kiribati's (in red) last competitive action was way back in 2011

Kiribati then briefly flirted with the alternative international football scene and joined the Confederation of International Football Associations (CONIFA) in 2016 before switching direction. KIFA's associate OFC membership had lapsed, but this was revived in 2020 when the confederation agreed to provide up to NZD$30,000 in grants for 2021 and 2022.

In 2023, Kiribati then entered the Pacific Games for the first time in 12 years, only for KIFA president Martin Tofinga to pass away unexpectedly that summer, which ultimately forced Kiribati to pull out of the football tournament.

Guillermo Landos subsequently took over as KIFA president and Kiribati travelled to the neighbouring Marshall Islands – only 400 miles away – for the Micronesian futsal tournament in 2024, emerging as winners.

In early 2025, a new shirt was launched in association with supplier Stingz, which teamed up with sponsors Young Pioneer Tours, Unchartered Football and Giordano to help KIFA attend the OFC's social responsibility forum in Fiji last June. "We learned about good governance, competition structure and development planning to help strengthen football in Kiribati," said Bauniti Niara, KIFA's technical media officer.

KIFA hopes that this will act as a springboard to help achieve full membership and has pledged to send a side to the football tournament at the 2027 Pacific Games in Tahiti, but is frustrated at some of the new membership criteria voted in at the OFC's last congress.

Kiribati's international experiences have been sporadic and largely frustrated by red tape

KIFA chief executive officer Tekeeua Kauongo says: "One of the main challenges to gaining full membership is meeting the infrastructure and facility requirements – particularly having a suitable national stadium and training facilities that align with OFC standards.

"This is a key project we are working on going forward. If these criteria can be flexible until such time [as] we are in the OFC family, then the priority of aligning our training facilities to OFC standard is promising."

A bid for FIFA membership would be the next step, but persuading the OFC to loosen criteria only introduced in 2024 may prove the biggest hindrance to Kiribati's international progress.

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Tales from the 211

Ten facts on the upcoming OFC Professional League

Local legend...Teaonui Tehau (L) will captain Tahiti United

1. CIRCUIT SERIES
The competition will be played across six stages known as circuit series, with New Zealand the only nation to host more than once. The first and final series will both take place in Auckland, while the fifth circuit in Fiji will take place in two different locations: Ba and Suva. Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea (circuit two) and Honiara in the Solomon Islands (circuit four) will also host, while, at the time of writing, the Australian host of circuit three was yet to be confirmed.

2. FREQUENT FLYERS
With six circuit series spread across the Pacific but none set to take place on their home island, Tahiti United will have to travel almost 46,500km to fulfil their fixtures. That is over 10,000km more than any other team in the tournament and almost double that of Auckland FC, the only club with two circuit series in their home city.

3. DATE LINE DIFFERENCES
Tahiti United are based on the opposite side of the International Date Line to the other seven participating clubs, meaning their supporters back home will technically be watching the games on a different day to fans of their rivals. French Polynesia – an overseas collective of France and the archipelago to which Tahiti belongs – is 23 hours behind Auckland, where the first circuit series takes place.

4. LOCAL LEGEND
Among the standout players set to feature in the inaugural OFC Pro League is Tahiti United's Teaonui Tehau, a icon on his home island. Tehau helped Tahiti become Oceanian champions in 2012, is the national team's record goalscorer with 31 goals in 49 appearances, and has even represented the country at the Beach Soccer World Cup. Now he will add captaining Tahiti's first professional football club in their first-ever tournament to his list of achievements.

5. PRO LEAGUE OVER PREMIER LEAGUE
Vanuatu United are the only team at the tournament with an all-European management team. They have appointed the German duo of Lars Hopp and Christian Happel as head coach and CEO respectively. Speaking at the OFC Pro League's soft launch event in New Zealand at the end of October, Happel joked that he is a big Liverpool fan but is so happy to be in Vanuatu that he would turn down any incoming job offer from Anfield!

6. NATIONAL TEAM BOOST
A number of the OFC Pro League head coaches also manage their club's national team. One such example is Bula FC boss Stephane Auvray, who believes his dual coaching role will boost the Fiji national team's fortunes. Speaking at the soft launch event, the Guadeloupean tactician explained that being able to train his players on a daily basis rather than for ten days per quarter would allow him to establish a style of play, an identity and a mindset.

7. COSTS FOR THE CLUBS
While the participating clubs have not received a preparation grant, they also do not have to pay an entry fee for the competition and will have their travel, accommodation and logistical expenses covered by the OFC. At the soft launch event, OFC general secretary Franck Castillo explained that there will be a solidarity mechanism and redistribution system so that the prize money does not unbalance the league.

8. SAUDI SPONSORSHIP
It has been announced that the Saudi Tourism Authority (STA) will invest almost NZ$35 million (£15m) to underwrite the costs of the new competition during its first four years. The news was revealed at the unveiling of the Fijian representative Bula FC in October at the competition's soft launch.

9. PARALLEL COMPETITIONS
While the OFC Pro League is being billed as Oceania's premier club competition, with its winner earning a place in the annual FIFA Intercontinental Cup and its best performer over a four-year period qualifying for the FIFA Club World Cup, the OFC Champions League will continue to run alongside it. The qualifying phase – featuring four clubs from Samoa, the Cook Islands, American Samoa and Tonga – will be staged in Samoa from January 31 to February 6, followed by the main tournament in Fiji from August 8-21.

10. CROSS-CONFEDERATION GUESTS
Australians South Melbourne, based in the Asian Football Confederation, are not the first example of a club competing in the primary continental competition of another confederation. Clubs from Mexico, a CONCACAF member, were regularly invited to take part in CONMEBOL's Copa Libertadores between 1998 and 2016, even reaching the final on three occasions – Cruz Azul in 2001, Guadalajara in 2010 and Tigres UANL in 2015.

The Sweeper

CIRCUIT SERIES

Round 1 Auckland, New Zealand *(Jan 17-24)*
Round 2 Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea *(Jan 31-Feb 8)*
Round 3 TBC, Australia *(Feb 21-28)*
Round 4 Honiara, Solomon Islands *(Mar 14-19)*
Round 5 Ba/Suva, Fiji *(Apr 11-18)*
Round 6 Auckland, New Zealand *(May 6-24)*

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Club Football

WORLD

2025 FIFA INTERCONTINENTAL CUP

Second Round

Dec 10 – Al Rayyan
Cruz Azul (Mex) 1 (Sanchez 44)
Flamengo (Bra) 1 (De Arrascaeta 15, 71)

Play-Off

Dec 13 – Al Rayyan
Flamengo (Bra) 2 (Pereira 24, Danilo 52)
Pyramids (Egy) 0

Final

Dec 17 – Al Rayyan
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 1 (Kvaratskhelia 38)
Flamengo (Bra) 1 (Jorginho 62 pen)
After Extra-Time; PSG win 2-1 on pens

EUROPE

2025-26 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Matchday 6

Dec 9 – Astana
Kairat (Kaz) 0
Olympiacos (Gre) 1 (Martins 73)

Dec 9 – Munich
Bayern Munich (Ger) 3 (Gnabry 65, Karl 69, Tah 77)
Sporting (Por) 1 (Kimmch 54 og)

Dec 9 – Monaco
Monaco (Fra) 1 (Balogun 68)
Galatasaray (Tur) 0

Dec 9 – Bergamo
Atalanta (Ita) 2 (Scamacca 55, De Ketelaere 83)
Chelsea (Eng) 1 (Joao Pedro 25)

Dec 9 – Barcelona
Barcelona (Spa) 2 (Kounde 50, 53)
Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger) 1 (Knauff 21)

Dec 9 – Milan
Internazionale (Ita) 0
Liverpool (Eng) 1 (Szoboszlai 88 pen)

Dec 9 – Eindhoven
PSV (Ned) 2 (Til 10, Pepi 85)
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 3 (Alvarez 37, Hancko 52, Sorloth 56)

Dec 9 – Brussels
Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel) 2 (Khalaily 5, 71)
Marseille (Fra) 3 (Igor Paixao 15, Greenwood 41, 58)

Dec 9 – London
Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) 3 (Zima 26 og, Kudus 50 pen, Simons 79 pen)
Slavia Prague (Cze) 0

Dec 10 – Baku
Qarabag (Aze) 2 (Duran 10, Silva 47)
Ajax (Ned) 4 (Dolberg 39, Gloukh 79, 90, Gaaei 83)

Dec 10 – Villarreal
Villarreal (Spa) 2 (Comesana 47, Oluwaseyi 56)
Copenhagen (Den) 3 (Elyounoussi 2, Achouri 48, Cornelius 90)

Dec 10 – Bilbao
Athletic Club (Spa) 0
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 0

Dec 10 – Leverkusen
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 2 (Guimaraes 13 og, Grimaldo 88)
Newcastle United (Eng) 2 (Gordon 51 pen, Miley 74)

Dec 10 – Dortmund
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 2 (Brandt 18, 51)
Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 2 (Aleesami 42, Hauge 75)

Dec 10 – Brugge
Club Brugge (Bel) 0
Arsenal (Eng) 3 (Madueke 25, 47, Martinelli 56)

Dec 10 – Turin
Juventus (Ita) 2 (McKennie 67, David 73)
Pafos (Cyp) 0

Dec 10 – Madrid
Real Madrid (Spa) 1 (Rodrygo 28)
Manchester City (Eng) 2 (O'Reilly 35, Haaland 43 pen)

Dec 10 – Lisbon
Benfica (Por) 2 (Rios 20, Barreiro 49)
Napoli (Ita) 0

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Arsenal	6	6	0	0	17	1	18
Bayern Munich	6	5	0	1	18	7	15
PSG	6	4	1	1	19	8	13
Man City	6	4	1	1	12	6	13
Atalanta	6	4	1	1	8	6	13
Internazionale	6	4	0	2	12	4	12
Real Madrid	6	4	0	2	13	7	12
Atletico Madrid	6	4	0	2	15	12	12
Liverpool	6	4	0	2	11	8	12
B. Dortmund	6	3	2	1	19	13	11
Tottenham Hotspur	6	3	2	1	13	7	11
Newcastle United	6	3	1	2	13	6	10
Chelsea	6	3	1	2	13	8	10
Sporting	6	3	1	2	12	8	10
Barcelona	6	3	1	2	14	11	10
Marseille	6	3	0	3	11	8	9
Juventus	6	2	3	1	12	10	9
Galatasaray	6	3	0	3	8	8	9
Monaco	6	2	3	1	7	8	9
B. Leverkusen	6	2	3	1	10	12	9
PSV	6	2	2	2	15	11	8
Qarabag	6	2	1	3	10	13	7
Napoli	6	2	1	3	6	11	7
Copenhagen	6	2	1	3	10	16	7
Benfica	6	2	0	4	6	8	6
Pafos	6	1	3	2	4	9	6
Union SG	6	2	0	4	7	15	6
Athletic Club	6	1	2	3	4	9	5
Olympiacos	6	1	2	3	6	13	5
E. Frankfurt	6	1	1	4	8	16	4
Club Brugge	6	1	1	4	8	16	4
Bodo/Glimt	6	0	3	3	9	13	3
Slavia Prague	6	0	3	3	2	11	3
Ajax	6	1	0	5	5	18	3
Villarreal	6	0	1	5	4	13	1
Kairat	6	0	1	5	4	15	1

2025-26 EUROPA LEAGUE

Matchday 6

Dec 11 – Bern
Young Boys (Sui) 1 (Males 61)
Lille (Fra) 0

Dec 11 – Herning
Midtjylland (Den) 1 (Cho Gue-sung 17)
Genk (Bel) 0

Dec 11 – Graz
Sturm Graz (Aut) 0
Red Star Belgrade (Srb) 1 (Ivanic 55)

Dec 11 – Utrecht
Utrecht (Ned) 1 (Van der Hoorn 73)
Nottingham Forest (Eng) 2 (Kalimuendo 52, Igor Jesus 88)

Dec 11 – Budapest
Ferencvaros (Hun) 2 (Otvos 45+5, Varga 72)
Rangers (Sco) 1 (Miovski 27)

Dec 11 – Zagreb
Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) 1 (Galesic 89)
Real Betis (Spa) 3 (Dominguez 31 og, Riquelme 34, Antony 38)

Dec 11 – Nice
Nice (Fra) 0
Braga (Por) 1 (Victor 28)

Dec 11 – Razgrad
Ludogorets (Bul) 3 (Stanic 33, Verdon 70, Chochev 77)
PAOK (Gre) 3 (Despodov 39, Vogliacco 48, Mythou 90)

Dec 11 – Stuttgart
Stuttgart (Ger) 4 (Assignon 24, Tomas 37, Mittelstadt 50 pen, Vagnoman 90+4)
Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) 1 (Revivo 52)

Dec 11 – Glasgow
Celtic (Sco) 0
Roma (Ita) 3 (Scales 6 og, Ferguson 36, 45+1)

Dec 11 – Porto
Porto (Por) 2 (Aghehowa 30, 36)
Malmo (Swe) 1 (Moura 90+5 og)

Dec 11 – Basel
Basel (Sui) 1 (Daniliuc 34)
Aston Villa (Eng) 2 (Guessand 12, Tielemans 53)

Dec 11 – Bucharest
FCSB (Rou) 4 (Ngezana 11, Toma 54, Thiam 87, Tanase 90+5)
Feyenoord (Ned) 3 (Tengstedt 41, Timber 44, Sauer 51)

Dec 11 – Lyon
Lyon (Fra) 2 (Moreira 3, Sulc 11)
Go Ahead Eagles (Ned) 1 (Smit 6)

Dec 11 – Athens
Panathinaikos (Gre) 0
Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 0

Dec 11 – Vigo
Celta Vigo (Spa) 1 (Zaragoza 17)
Bologna (Ita) 2 (Bernardeschi 66 pen, 74)

Dec 11 – Freiburg
Freiburg (Ger) 1 (Lienhart 50)
Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) 0

Dec 11 – Bergen
Brann (Nor) 0
Fenerbahce (Tur) 4 (Akturkoglu 5, Anderson Talisca 36, 44, 65)

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lyon	6	5	0	1	13	3	15
Midtjylland	6	5	0	1	13	5	15
Aston Villa	6	5	0	1	10	4	15
Real Betis	6	4	2	0	11	4	14
Freiburg	6	4	2	0	9	3	14
Ferencvaros	6	4	2	0	11	6	14
Braga	6	4	1	1	10	5	13
Porto	6	4	1	1	9	5	13
Stuttgart	6	4	0	2	12	5	12
Roma	6	4	0	2	10	5	12
Nottingham Forest	6	3	2	1	11	6	11
Fenerbahce	6	3	2	1	9	5	11
Bologna	6	3	2	1	9	5	11
Viktoria Plzen	6	2	4	0	6	2	10
Panathinaikos	6	3	1	2	9	7	10
Genk	6	3	1	2	7	6	10
Red Star Belgrade	6	3	1	2	5	5	10
PAOK	6	2	3	1	13	10	9
Celta Vigo	6	3	0	3	12	9	9
Lille	6	3	0	3	10	7	9
Young Boys	6	3	0	3	8	12	9
Brann	6	2	2	2	6	7	8
Ludogorets	6	2	1	3	11	14	7
Celtic	6	2	1	3	7	11	7
Dinamo Zagreb	6	2	1	3	8	13	7
Basel	6	2	0	4	8	9	6
FCSB	6	2	0	4	7	11	6
Go Ahead Eagles	6	2	0	4	5	11	6
Sturm Graz	6	1	1	4	4	8	4
Red Bull Salzburg	6	1	0	5	5	11	3
Feyenoord	6	1	0	5	7	13	3
Utrecht	6	0	1	5	3	9	1
Rangers	6	0	1	5	3	11	1
Malmo	6	0	1	5	3	12	1
Maccabi Tel Aviv	6	0	1	5	2	18	1
Nice	6	0	0	6	4	13	0

2025-26 CONFERENCE LEAGUE

Matchday 5

Dec 11 – Reykjavik
Breidablik (Isl) 3 (Margeirsson 35, Omarsson 74, Jonsson 90+2)
Shamrock Rovers (Irl) 1 (Burke 32)

Dec 11 – Florence
Fiorentina (Ita) 2 (Kean 18, Gudmundsson 74)
Dynamo Kyiv (Ukr) 1 (Mykhaylenko 55)

Dec 11 – Gothenburg
BK Hacken (Swe) 1 (Hammar 90+4)
AEK Larnaca (Cyp) 1 (Helander 65 og)

Dec 11 – Pristina
Drita (Kos) 0
AZ (Ned) 3 (Mijnans 17, Jensen 58, Sadiq 90)

Dec 11 – Yerevan
Noah (Arm) 2 (Aias 57, Mulahusejnovic 84)
Legia Warsaw (Pol) 1 (Rajovic 3)

Dec 11 – Bialystok
Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) 1 (Imaz 44)
Rayo Vallecano (Spa) 2 (Camello 6, Espino 61)

Dec 11 – Skopje
Shkendija (Mkd) 2 (Bajric 33 og, Spahiu 45+1)
Slovan Bratislava (Svk) 0

Dec 11 – Samsun
Samsunspor (Tur) 1 (Moukoudi 4 og)
AEK Athens (Gre) 2 (Marin 52, Koita 63)

Dec 11 – Craiova
Universitatea Craiova (Rou) 1 (Nsimba 79)
Sparta Prague (Cze) 2 (Rrahmani 50, Rynec 89)

Dec 11 – Aberdeen
Aberdeen (Sco) 0
Strasbourg (Fra) 1 (Godo 35)

Dec 11 – Ta'Qali
Hamrun Spartans (Mal) 0
Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 2 (Meirelles 61, Isaque 64)

Dec 11 – Rijeka
Rijeka (Cro) 3 (Adu-Adjei 55, Petrovic 71, Fruk 78)
Celje (Svn) 0

Dec 11 – Poznan
Lech Poznan (Pol) 1 (Ishak 41 pen)
Mainz (Ger) 1 (Kawasaki 28)

Dec 11 – Tampere
KuPS (Fin) 0
Lausanne-Sport (Sui) 0

Dec 11 – Gibraltar
Lincoln Red Imps (Gib) 2 (Koutny 19 og, Pozo 73)
Sigma Olomouc (Cze) 1 (Vasulin 8)

Dec 11 – Sosnowiec
Rakow Czestochowa (Pol) 1 (Brunes 45+5 pen)
Zrinjski Mostar (Bih) 0

Dec 11 – Dublin
Shelbourne (Irl) 0
Crystal Palace (Eng) 3 (Uche 11, Nketiah 25, Yeremy 37)

Dec 11 – Vienna
Rapid Vienna (Aut) 0
Omonia (Cyp) 1 (Neophytou 19)

Matchday 6

Dec 18 – Mainz
Mainz (Ger) 2 (Widmer 44, Amiri 48 pen)
Samsunspor (Tur) 0

Dec 18 – Prague
Sparta Prague (Cze) 3 (Mercado 16, Haraslin 29, Kuol 66)
Aberdeen (Sco) 0

Dec 18 – Athens
AEK Athens (Gre) 3 (Vida 65, Kutesa 90+8, Jovic 90+14 pen)
Universitatea Craiova (Rou) 2 (Baiaram 30, Cicaldau 59)

Dec 18 – Larnaca
AEK Larnaca (Cyp) 1 (Angielski 83)
Shkendija (Mkd) 0

Dec 18 – Alkmaar
AZ (Ned) 0
Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) 0

Dec 18 – London
Crystal Palace (Eng) 2 (Uche 5, Devenny 76)
KuPS (Fin) 2 (Parzyszek 50, Cisse 53)

Dec 18 – Krakow
Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 0
Rijeka (Cro) 0

Dec 18 – Lublin
Dynamo Kyiv (Ukr) 2 (Kabayev 27, Ponomarenko 50)
Noah (Arm) 0

Dec 18 – Lausanne
Lausanne-Sport (Sui) 1 (Sigua 58)
Fiorentina (Ita) 0

Dec 18 – Mostar
Zrinjski Mostar (Bih) 1 (Cvetkovic 90+3 og)
Rapid Vienna (Aut) 1 (Schaub 11)

Dec 18 – Warsaw
Legia Warsaw (Pol) 4 (Colak 21, Kapustka 62, Rajovic 70, Bichakhchyan 83)
Lincoln Red Imps (Gib) 1 (De Barr 89)

Dec 18 – Celje
Celje (Svn) 0
Shelbourne (Irl) 0

Dec 18 – Nicosia
Omonia (Cyp) 0
Rakow Czestochowa (Pol) 1 (Repka 49)

Dec 18 – Strasbourg
Strasbourg (Fra) 3 (Nanasi 11, Godo 80, Enciso 90+4)
Breidablik (Isl) 1 (Gunnlaugsson 37)

Dec 18 – Madrid
Rayo Vallecano (Spa) 3 (Lejeune 33, Gumbau 66, Espino 83)
Drita (Kos) 0

Dec 18 – Dublin
Shamrock Rovers (Irl) 3 (Burke 14 pen, Grant 45+4, McGovern 90+3)
Hamrun Spartans (Mal) 1 (Koffi 20)

Dec 18 – Olomouc
Sigma Olomouc (Cze) 1 (Kral 84)
Lech Poznan (Pol) 2 (Ishak 35, 45+1 pen)

Dec 18 – Bratislava
Slovan Bratislava (Svk) 1 (Blackman 85)
BK Hacken (Swe) 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Strasbourg*	6	5	1	0	11	5	16
Rakow Czestochowa*	6	4	2	0	9	2	14
AEK Athens*	6	4	1	1	14	7	13
Sparta Prague*	6	4	1	1	10	3	13
Rayo Vallecano*	6	4	1	1	13	7	13
Shakhtar Donetsk*	6	4	1	1	10	5	13
Mainz*	6	4	1	1	7	3	13
AEK Larnaca*	6	3	3	0	7	1	12
Lausanne-Sport**	6	3	2	1	6	3	11
Crystal Palace**	6	3	1	2	11	6	10
Lech Poznan**	6	3	1	2	12	8	10
Samsunspor**	6	3	1	2	10	6	10
Celje**	6	3	1	2	8	7	10
AZ**	6	3	1	2	7	7	10
Fiorentina**	6	3	0	3	8	5	9
Rijeka**	6	2	3	1	5	2	9
Jagiellonia Bialystok**	6	2	3	1	5	4	9
Omonia**	6	2	2	2	5	4	8
Noah**	6	2	2	2	6	7	8
Drita**	6	2	2	2	4	8	8
KuPS**	6	1	4	1	6	5	7
Shkendija**	6	2	1	3	4	5	7
Zrinjski Mostar**	6	2	1	3	8	10	7
Sigma Olomouc**	6	2	1	3	7	9	7
Universitatea Craiova	6	2	1	3	6	8	7
Lincoln Red Imps	6	2	1	3	7	15	7
Dynamo Kyiv	6	2	0	4	9	9	6
Legia Warsaw	6	2	0	4	8	8	6
Slovan Bratislava	6	2	0	4	5	9	6
Breidablik	6	1	2	3	6	11	5
Shamrock Rovers	6	1	1	4	7	13	4
BK Hacken	6	0	3	3	5	8	3
Hamrun Spartans	6	1	0	5	4	11	3
Shelbourne	6	0	2	4	0	7	2
Aberdeen	6	0	2	4	3	14	2
Rapid Vienna	6	0	1	5	3	14	1

*Advance to last 16
**Enter knockout round play-offs

2025-26 ITALIAN SUPER CUP

Semi-Finals

Dec 18 – Riyadh
Napoli 2 (Neres 39, Hojlund 64)
Milan 0

Dec 18 – Riyadh
Bologna 1 (Orsolini 35 pen)
Internazionale 1 (Thuram 2)
Bologna win 3-2 on pens

Final

Dec 22 – Riyadh
Napoli 2 (Neres 39, 57)
Bologna 0

SOUTH AMERICA

ARGENTINA

Clausura Zone A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Boca Juniors*	16	8	5	3	28	12	29
Union*	16	6	7	3	20	13	25
Racing*	16	7	4	5	16	13	25
Central Cordoba*	16	5	9	2	17	11	24
Argentinos Juniors*	16	7	3	6	18	13	24
Barracas Central*	16	5	8	3	19	17	23
Tigre*	16	5	7	4	14	13	22
Estudiantes* (C)	16	6	3	7	17	18	21
Banfield	16	6	3	7	15	21	21
Belgrano	16	4	8	4	13	11	20
Huracan	16	5	5	6	10	15	20
Defensa y Justicia	16	5	4	7	14	19	19
Aldosivi	16	5	3	8	13	18	18
Independiente Rivadavia	16	3	7	6	14	17	16
Newell's Old Boys	16	3	5	8	13	23	14

*Advance to finals stage

Clausura Zone B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Rosario Central*	16	8	7	1	18	8	31
Lanus*	16	9	3	4	20	13	30
Deportivo Riestra*	16	8	4	4	19	12	28
Velez Sarsfield*	16	7	5	4	19	12	26
San Lorenzo*	16	6	6	4	13	11	24
River Plate*	16	6	4	6	20	15	22
Gimnasia y Esgrima*	16	7	1	8	14	16	22
Talleres*	16	5	6	5	9	12	21
Sarmiento	16	5	5	6	13	17	20
San Martin	16	4	7	5	13	16	19
Independiente	16	4	6	6	14	13	18
Atletico Tucuman	16	5	3	8	17	22	18
Instituto	16	3	7	6	9	17	16
Godoy Cruz	16	1	9	6	11	19	12
Platense	16	2	6	8	12	25	12

*Advance to finals stage

Last 16

Nov 22-26: Velez Sarsfield 0-2 Argentinos Juniors; Central Cordoba 2-1 San Lorenzo; Rosario Central 0-1 Estudiantes; Boca Juniors 2-0 Talleres; Deportivo Riestra 0-1 Barracas Central (*AET*); Racing 3-2 River Plate; Union 1-2 Gimnasia y Esgrima; Lanus 0-1 Tigre

Quarter-Finals

Nov 29-Dec 1: Central Cordoba 0-1 Estudiantes; Boca Juniors 1-0 Argentinos Juniors; Barracas Central 0-2 Gimnasia y Esgrima; Racing 0-0 Tigre (*AET, Racing win 4-2 on pens*)

Semi-Finals

Dec 7-8: Boca Juniors 0-1 Racing; Gimnasia y Esgrima 0-1 Estudiantes

Final

Dec 13 – Santiago del Estero
Racing 1 (Martinez 80)
Estudiantes 1 (Carrillo 90+2)
After Extra-Time; Estudiantes win 5-4 on pens

Campeon de Liga Aggregate Table

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Rosario Central (C)	32	18	12	2	40	16	66
Boca Juniors	32	18	8	6	52	23	62
Argentinos Juniors	32	16	9	7	42	22	57
River Plate	32	14	11	7	41	24	53
Racing	32	16	5	11	42	29	53
Deportivo Riestra	32	13	13	6	32	19	52
San Lorenzo	32	13	12	7	27	21	51
Lanus	32	13	11	8	33	24	50
Tigre	32	13	10	9	32	25	49
Barracas Central	32	12	13	7	39	35	49
Independiente	32	12	11	9	37	25	47
Huracan	32	12	11	9	29	27	47
Independiente Rivadavia	32	10	13	9	34	34	43
Central Cordoba	32	10	12	10	38	33	42
Estudiantes	32	11	9	12	35	37	42
Velez Sarsfield	32	11	7	14	26	34	40
Union	32	9	12	11	31	30	39
Defensa y Justicia	32	10	8	14	32	41	38
Gimnasia y Esgrima	32	11	5	16	23	34	38
Belgrano	32	7	16	9	26	34	37
Banfield	32	9	8	15	29	40	35
Platense	32	8	11	13	25	36	35
Sarmiento	32	7	14	11	24	36	35
Talleres	32	7	13	12	20	27	34
Atletico Tucuman	32	10	4	18	34	43	34
Instituto	32	8	10	14	25	37	34
Newell's Old Boys	32	8	9	15	25	38	33
Aldosivi	32	9	6	17	31	46	33
Godoy Cruz (R)	32	4	17	11	19	37	29
San Martin (R)	32	6	10	16	18	34	28

2025 ARGENTINE CHAMPIONS TROPHY

Dec 20 – San Nicolas de los Arroyos
Estudiantes 2 (Alario 79, 90)
Platense 1 (Zapiola 49)

BOLIVIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Always Ready (C)	30	22	5	3	91	34	71
Bolivar	30	21	5	4	82	32	68
The Strongest	30	21	1	8	77	48	64
San Antonio Bulo Bulo	30	13	7	10	62	54	46
Blooming	30	14	4	12	53	56	46
Independiente Petrolero	30	13	6	11	56	57	45
Nacional Potosi	30	12	7	11	51	41	43
Guabira	30	13	4	13	59	63	43
GV San Jose	30	12	5	13	46	50	41
Aurora	30	11	4	15	53	63	37
Real Tomayapo	30	9	8	13	40	53	35
Oriente Petrolero	30	9	6	15	45	58	33
Real Oruro	30	8	7	15	60	66	31
Universitario de Vinto	30	6	8	16	32	60	26
ABB*	30	6	8	16	33	64	26
Jorge Wilstermann (R)	30	4	7	19	30	71	19

*Enter promotion-relegation play-off

Promotion-Relegation Play-Off

Dec 21: San Juan 3-1 ABB
Dec 23: ABB 2-0 San Juan
(agg 3-3, ABB win 5-3 on pens)

BRAZIL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Flamengo (C)	38	23	10	5	78	27	79
Palmeiras	38	23	7	8	66	33	76
Cruzeiro	38	19	13	6	55	31	70
Mirassol	38	18	13	7	63	39	67
Fluminense	38	19	7	12	50	39	64
Botafogo	38	17	12	9	58	38	63
Bahia	38	17	9	12	50	47	60
Sao Paulo	38	14	9	15	43	47	51
Gremio	38	13	10	15	47	50	49
RB Bragantino	38	14	6	18	45	57	48
Atletico Mineiro	38	12	12	14	43	44	48
Santos	38	12	11	15	45	50	47
Corinthians	38	12	11	15	42	47	47
Vasco da Gama	38	13	6	19	55	60	45
Vitoria	38	11	12	15	35	52	45
Internacional	38	11	11	16	44	57	44
Ceara (R)	38	11	10	17	34	40	43
Fortaleza (R)	38	11	10	17	44	58	43
Juventude (R)	38	9	8	21	35	69	35
Sport Recife (R)	38	2	11	25	28	75	17

CHILE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Coquimbo Unido (C)	30	23	6	1	49	17	75
Universidad Catolica	30	17	7	6	44	26	58
O'Higgins	30	16	8	6	43	34	56
Universidad de Chile	30	17	4	9	58	32	55
Audax Italiano	30	16	4	10	51	43	52
Palestino	30	14	7	9	42	31	49
Cobresal	30	14	5	11	38	38	47
Colo-Colo	30	12	8	10	46	36	44
Huachipato	30	12	7	11	43	42	43
Nublense	30	8	9	13	31	40	33
Deportes Limache	30	8	7	15	36	43	31
Union La Calera	30	8	5	17	28	39	29
Deportes La Serena	30	7	6	17	32	52	27
Everton	30	6	8	16	27	44	26
Deportes Iquique (R)	30	6	6	18	34	60	24
Union Espanola (R)	30	6	3	21	33	58	21

COLOMBIA

Finalizacion

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Independiente Medellin*	20	12	4	4	46	28	40
Deportes Tolima*	20	12	2	6	29	17	38
Atletico Nacional*	20	10	7	3	38	24	37
Atletico Bucaramanga*	20	11	4	5	31	20	37
Junior*	20	10	5	5	35	25	35
Fortaleza*	20	9	8	3	25	19	35
Santa Fe*	20	8	7	5	21	17	31
America de Cali*	20	8	5	7	23	19	29
Alianza	20	8	5	7	24	22	29
Aguilas Doradas	20	7	6	7	29	27	27
Once Caldas	20	7	6	7	21	24	27
Millonarios	20	7	5	8	23	26	26
Llaneros	20	7	4	9	17	25	25
Deportivo Cali	20	5	6	9	22	28	21
Union Magdalena	20	6	3	11	22	32	21
Envigado	20	4	8	8	18	22	20
Deportivo Pasto	20	4	7	9	26	28	19
Deportivo Pereira	20	4	6	10	19	36	18
Boyaca Chico	20	3	7	10	14	29	16
La Equidad	20	3	5	12	14	29	14

*Advance to next stage

Semi-Final Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Junior* (C)	6	3	2	1	8	6	11
America de Cali	6	2	2	2	8	8	8
Atletico Nacional	6	2	2	2	7	7	8
Independiente Medellin	6	1	2	3	5	7	5

*Advance to final

Semi-Final Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Deportes Tolima*	6	4	2	0	5	1	14
Atletico Bucaramanga	6	2	3	1	4	2	9
Santa Fe	6	2	1	3	6	5	7
Fortaleza	6	1	0	5	3	10	3

*Advance to final

Final

Dec 12:
Junior 3-0 Deportes Tolima
Dec 16:
Deportes Tolima 0-1 Junior (agg 0-4)

Aggregate Table

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Deportes Tolima	54	28	12	14	73	49	96
Independiente Medellin	54	25	17	12	80	52	92
Junior (C)	54	25	15	14	75	55	90
Atletico Nacional	52	24	16	12	87	57	88
Santa Fe (C)	54	24	15	15	65	52	87
America de Cali	52	23	16	13	67	46	85
Atletico Bucaramanga	46	21	12	13	59	42	75
Millonarios	46	20	13	13	58	47	73
Once Caldas	46	17	12	17	51	53	63
Alianza	40	16	10	14	47	43	58
Fortaleza	46	15	13	18	43	54	58
Aguilas Doradas	40	11	15	14	46	46	48
Deportivo Pasto	40	12	12	16	46	48	48
Deportivo Pereira	40	11	13	16	41	57	46
Deportivo Cali	40	10	15	15	36	45	45
Llaneros	40	13	6	21	37	53	45
Envigado	40	9	11	20	34	51	38
Boyaca Chico	40	7	15	18	28	60	36
Union Magdalena	40	7	11	22	36	62	32
La Equidad	40	5	9	26	27	64	24

Relegation Table

	2023	2024	2025	GD*	P	Pts	Avg Pts
Deportes Tolima	61	72	74	+23	118	207	1.754
America de Cali	69	62	68	+21	118	199	1.686
Independiente Medellin	68	58	72	+26	118	198	1.678
Atletico Nacional	68	56	72	+30	118	196	1.661
Millonarios	68	66	64	+10	118	198	1.678
Junior	58	60	72	+20	118	190	1.610
Santa Fe	50	71	64	+9	118	185	1.568
Atletico Bucaramanga	46	66	66	+15	118	178	1.508
Aguilas Doradas	83	46	48	0	118	177	1.500
Once Caldas	42	60	60	+1	118	162	1.373
Fortaleza	—	51	55	-4	78	106	1.359
Deportivo Pasto	54	49	48	-2	118	151	1.280
Deportivo Pereira	44	61	46	-16	118	151	1.280
Alianza	58	33	58	+4	118	149	1.263
Deportivo Cali	51	38	45	-9	118	134	1.136
Llaneros	—	—	45	-16	40	45	1.125
La Equidad	52	55	24	-37	118	131	1.110
Boyaca Chico	49	33	36	-32	118	118	1.000
Envigado (R)	33	29	38	-17	118	100	0.847
Union Magdalena (R)	—	—	32	-26	40	32	0.800

Goal difference for 2025 season only

ECUADOR

First Stage

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Independiente del Valle	30	18	10	2	55	23	64
Barcelona	30	16	6	8	46	33	54
LDU Quito	30	14	9	7	48	31	51
Universidad Catolica	30	13	10	7	58	39	49
Orense	30	13	8	9	34	32	47
Libertad	30	12	10	8	42	36	46
Deportivo Cuenca	30	13	7	10	35	29	46
Emelec	30	11	9	10	30	34	42
Aucas	30	11	8	11	38	41	41
Macara	30	9	11	10	32	30	38
El Nacional	30	9	7	14	32	46	34
Delfin	30	6	13	11	26	42	31
Tecnico Universitario	30	7	7	16	26	46	28
Vinotinto Ecuador	30	7	6	17	34	43	27
Mushuc Runa	30	7	6	17	38	50	27
Manta	30	5	11	14	34	53	26

• *Top six teams advance to first hexagonal, teams placed 7th to 12th advance to second hexagonal and bottom four teams enter relegation group*

First Hexagonal

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Independiente del Valle (C)	40	23	13	4	67	30	82
LDU Quito	40	19	12	9	68	41	69
Barcelona	40	19	10	11	56	47	67
Universidad Catolica	40	14	16	10	67	50	58
Orense	40	16	10	14	44	48	58
Libertad	40	14	14	12	54	51	56

Second Hexagonal

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Macara	40	17	11	12	53	35	62
Deportivo Cuenca	40	17	8	15	51	41	59
Aucas	40	16	10	14	59	54	58
Emelec	40	15	10	15	42	49	55
Delfin	40	8	15	17	33	62	39
El Nacional* (R)	40	12	9	19	44	70	36

**Deducted 9 points and administratively relegated*

Relegation Group

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Manta	36	9	12	15	46	59	39
Mushuc Runa	36	9	9	18	42	55	36
Tecnico Universitario (R)	36	8	9	19	31	54	33
Vinotinto Ecuador (R)	36	8	8	20	40	51	32

PARAGUAY

Clausura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cerro Porteno (C)	22	13	7	2	33	18	46
Guarani	22	14	3	5	44	20	45
Nacional	22	9	8	5	26	17	35
Sportivo Trinidense	22	8	9	5	25	21	33
2 de Mayo	22	9	6	7	28	27	33
Recoleta	22	9	5	8	35	30	32
Libertad	22	6	8	8	26	24	26
Olimpia	22	6	8	8	33	38	26
Sportivo Luqueno	22	7	4	11	27	36	25
General Caballero (JLM)	22	6	6	10	22	33	24
Sportivo Ameliano	22	5	4	13	22	40	19
Tembetary	22	3	6	13	20	37	15

Aggregate Table

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cerro Porteno (C)	44	24	13	7	66	36	85
Guarani	44	26	5	13	71	44	83
Libertad (C)	44	18	16	10	61	39	70
Sportivo Trinidense	44	16	19	9	52	43	67
Nacional	44	16	12	16	49	45	60
Recoleta	44	15	14	15	64	61	59
Olimpia	44	14	17	13	60	60	59
2 de Mayo	44	11	18	15	43	53	51
Sportivo Ameliano	44	12	12	20	45	60	48
Sportivo Luqueno	44	11	14	19	40	61	47
General Caballero (JLM)	44	11	13	20	41	59	46
Tembetary	44	6	15	23	37	68	33

Relegation Table

	2023	2024	2025	P	Pts	Avg Pts
Libertad	99	74	70	243	132	1.841
Cerro Porteno	81	74	85	240	132	1.818
Guarani	65	66	83	214	132	1.621
Olimpia	62	80	59	201	132	1.523
Nacional	65	55	60	180	132	1.364
Sportivo Trinidense	65	46	67	178	132	1.348
Recoleta	—	—	59	59	44	1.341
2 de Mayo	—	65	51	116	88	1.318
Sportivo Ameliano	57	56	48	161	132	1.22
Sportivo Luqueno	51	61	47	159	132	1.205
General Caballero (JLM) (R)	49	47	46	142	132	1.076
Tembetary (R)	—	—	33	33	44	0.75

PERU

Clausura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Universitario (C)	17	12	4	1	29	13	40
Cusco	17	11	3	3	29	15	36
Sporting Cristal	17	9	4	4	29	13	31
Alianza Lima	17	9	4	4	30	19	31
Cienciano	17	8	3	6	25	21	27
Los Chankas	17	9	0	8	21	28	27
Comerciantes Unidos	17	7	5	5	20	21	26
Melgar	17	6	7	4	24	17	25
Deportivo Garcilaso	17	6	7	4	20	21	25
ADT	17	7	4	6	19	20	25
Alianza Atletico	17	6	5	6	15	12	23
Sport Huancayo	17	5	3	9	28	28	18
Alianza Universidad	17	5	2	10	23	33	17
Atletico Grau	17	4	4	9	19	24	16
Sport Boys	17	4	4	9	14	25	16
Juan Pablo II College	17	3	5	9	13	23	14
Ayacucho	17	4	2	11	16	29	14
UTC	17	3	4	10	16	28	13
Binacional*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

**Disqualified*

Aggregate Table

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Universitario (C)	35	24	7	4	67	25	79
Cusco*	35	21	7	7	63	35	70
Alianza Lima*	35	20	8	7	53	30	68
Sporting Cristal*	35	19	6	10	60	37	63
Alianza Atletico	35	17	6	12	43	30	57
Melgar	35	14	14	7	52	37	56
Deportivo Garcilaso	35	14	10	11	48	40	52
Cienciano	35	13	11	11	54	46	50
Los Chankas	35	14	8	13	45	53	50
ADT	35	13	10	12	43	50	49
Sport Huancayo	35	14	6	15	51	49	48
Atletico Grau	35	9	11	15	42	48	38
Comerciantes Unidos	35	9	10	16	37	52	37
Sport Boys	35	9	9	17	40	53	36
Juan Pablo II College	35	8	9	18	33	51	33
UTC	35	8	8	19	33	62	32
Ayacucho (R)	35	8	5	22	30	56	29
Alianza Universidad (R)	35	7	7	21	39	66	28
Binacional (R)	18	4	6	8	20	33	18

**Advance to runners-up play-offs*

Runners-Up Play-Offs Stage 1

Dec 2: Sporting Cristal 1-1 Alianza Lima
Dec 6: Alianza Lima 3-3 Sporting Cristal
(agg 4-4, *Sporting Cristal win 5-4 on pens*)

Runners-Up Play-Offs Stage 2

Dec 10: Sporting Cristal 1-0 Cusco
Dec 14: Cusco 2-0 Sporting Cristal (agg 2-1)

URUGUAY

Clausura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Penarol*	15	11	2	2	30	12	35
Nacional**	15	8	6	1	25	11	27
Montevideo City Torque	15	8	3	4	28	17	27
Boston River	15	6	8	1	26	10	26
Cerro Largo	15	7	4	4	19	14	25
Liverpool	15	7	4	4	19	16	25
Cerro	15	7	3	5	13	13	24
Defensor Sporting	15	7	2	6	13	16	23
Danubio	15	6	3	6	18	13	21
Progreso	15	5	3	7	17	23	18
Racing	15	4	5	6	14	22	17
Juventud	15	4	4	7	8	13	16
River Plate	15	3	5	7	12	18	14
Miramar Misiones	15	3	4	8	17	26	13
Plaza Colonia	15	2	2	11	9	26	8
Montevideo Wanderers	15	1	4	10	7	25	7

**Advance to play-offs **Deducted 3 points*

Aggregate Table

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Nacional* (C)	37	24	10	3	76	33	79
Penarol	37	24	6	7	66	34	78
Liverpool**	37	18	11	8	51	37	65
Juventud	37	18	7	12	45	39	61
Defensor Sporting	37	18	7	12	42	38	61
Boston River	37	14	13	10	50	39	55
Racing	37	14	11	12	39	38	53
Montevideo City Torque	37	13	10	14	54	51	49
Cerro Largo	37	12	13	12	41	41	49
Cerro***	37	12	11	14	33	42	46
Danubio	37	10	13	14	41	41	43
Progreso	37	10	9	18	38	60	39
Plaza Colonia	37	8	11	18	28	46	35
Montevideo Wanderers	37	6	13	18	25	47	31
River Plate	37	6	11	20	28	48	29
Miramar Misiones	37	7	8	22	35	58	29

**Deducted 3 points; advance to play-offs*
***Advance to play-offs as Apertura winners*
****Deducted 1 point*

Championship Play-Offs

Semi-Finals

Nov 16: Liverpool 1-2 Penarol (*AET*)

Final

Nov 23: Penarol 2-2 Nacional
Nov 30: Nacional 1-0 Penarol (*AET*)

Relegation Table

	2024	2025	P	Pts	Avg Pts
Penarol	93	78	171	74	2.311
Nacional	86	79	165	74	2.23
Juventud	—	61	61	37	1.649
Defensor Sporting	59	61	120	74	1.622
Boston River	60	55	115	74	1.554
Racing	52	53	105	74	1.419
Liverpool	39	65	104	74	1.405
Cerro Largo	54	49	103	74	1.392
Montevideo City Torque	—	49	49	37	1.324
Danubio	53	43	96	74	1.297
Cerro	39	46	85	74	1.149
Montevideo Wanderers	48	31	79	74	1.068
Progreso	40	39	79	74	1.068
Plaza Colonia (R)	—	35	35	37	0.946
River Plate (R)	40	29	69	74	0.932
Miramar Misiones (R)	40	29	69	74	0.932

VENEZUELA

Clausura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Deportivo La Guaira*	13	10	1	2	29	8	31
Deportivo Tachira*	13	8	3	2	23	12	27
Carabobo*	13	7	4	2	14	8	25
Monagas*	13	6	4	3	19	15	22
Caracas*	13	6	3	4	17	17	21
Zamora*	13	6	1	6	11	15	19
Academia Puerto Cabello'	13	4	6	3	12	10	18
Metropolitanos*	13	5	2	6	21	19	17
Universidad Central	13	5	2	6	19	18	17
Estudiantes de Merida	13	5	1	7	11	16	16
Rayo Zuliano	13	4	1	8	10	19	13
Anzoategui	13	3	2	8	10	18	11
Yaracuyanos	13	3	1	9	11	21	10
Portuguesa**	13	3	1	9	10	21	7

**Advance to next stage **Deducted 3 points*

Semi-Final Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Academia Puerto Cabello'	5	4	1	0	11	4	13
Deportivo La Guaira	6	2	2	2	5	7	8
Zamora	5	2	1	2	5	5	7
Monagas	6	1	0	5	5	10	3

**Advance to final*

Semi-Final Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Carabobo*	6	4	2	0	10	2	14
Caracas	6	2	3	1	7	7	9
Deportivo Tachira	6	1	3	2	7	7	6
Metropolitanos	6	0	2	4	4	12	2

**Advance to final*

Final

Nov 23: Carabobo 1-0 Academia Puerto Cabello

Grand Final

Nov 30: Universidad Central 1-1 Carabobo
Dec 6: Carabobo 0-2 Universidad Central (agg 1-3)

Aggregate Table

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Deportivo La Guaira	26	17	6	3	49	19	57
Carabobo	26	14	9	3	27	15	51
Deportivo Tachira	26	14	8	4	42	22	50
Universidad Central (C)	26	12	6	8	34	27	42
Academia Puerto Cabello	26	10	9	7	26	20	39
Monagas	26	10	7	9	36	36	37
Caracas	26	10	7	9	29	32	37
Metropolitanos	26	9	6	11	38	37	33
Anzoategui	26	8	7	11	28	31	31
Zamora	26	8	4	14	22	33	28
Rayo Zuliano	26	8	3	15	23	36	27
Estudiantes de Merida	26	8	2	16	26	39	26
Portuguesa*	26	8	4	14	24	35	25
Yaracuyanos (R)	26	4	6	16	23	45	18

**Deducted 3 points*

CONCACAF

UNITED STATES

MLS Cup 2025

Eastern Conference Wild Card Round

Oct 22 – Illinois
Chicago Fire 3 (Gutierrez 48, Cuypers 57, 68)
Orlando City 1 (Spice 89)

Western Conference Wild Card Round

Oct 22 – Portland
Portland Timbers 3 (Mora 24, 35, K. Miller 82)
Real Salt Lake 1 (Glad 33)

Eastern Conference First Round – Match 1

Oct 24 – Fort Lauderdale
Inter Miami 3 (Messi 19, 90+6, Allende 62)
Nashville SC 1 (Mukhtar 90+11)

Oct 26 – Chester
Philadelphia Union 2 (Vassilev 70, Iloski 75)
Chicago Fire 2 (Bamba 84, Elliott 90+3)
Philadelphia Union win 4-2 on pens

Oct 27 – Cincinnati
FC Cincinnati 1 (Denkey 78)
Columbus Crew 0

Oct 28 – Charlotte
Charlotte FC 0
New York City FC 1 (Martinez 34)

Eastern Conference First Round – Match 2

Nov 1 – Nashville
Nashville SC 2 (Surridge 9 pen, Bauer 45)
Inter Miami 1 (Messi 90)

Nov 1 – Bridgeview
Chicago Fire 0
Philadelphia Union 3 (Baribo 8, 16, Damiani 35)
Philadelphia Union win the series 2-0

Nov 1 – New York
New York City FC 0
Charlotte FC 0
Charlotte FC win 7-6 on pens

Nov 2 – Columbus
Columbus Crew 4 (Arfsten 33, Chambost 41, Herrera 65, Russell-Rowe 69)
FC Cincinnati 0

Eastern Conference First Round – Match 3

Nov 7 – Charlotte
Charlotte FC 1 (Toklomati 81)
New York City FC 3 (Fernandez 45+2, 90+10, Martinez 50)
New York City FC win the series 2-1

Nov 8 – Cincinnati
FC Cincinnati 2 (Brenner 67, 86)
Columbus Crew 1 (Russell-Rowe 63)
FC Cincinnati win the series 2-1

Nov 8 – Fort Lauderdale
Inter Miami 4 (Messi 10, 39, Allende 73, 76)
Nashville SC 0
Inter Miami win the series 2-1

Western Conference First Round – Match 1

Oct 26 – San Diego
San Diego FC 2 (Valakari 23, Dreyer 30)
Portland Timbers 1 (Velde 36)

Oct 26 – Vancouver
Vancouver Whitecaps 3 (Rios 43, Muller 60 pen, Cabrera 83)
FC Dallas 0

Oct 27 – St Paul
Minnesota United 0
Seattle Sounders 0
Minnesota United win 3-2 on pens

Oct 29 – Los Angeles
LAFC 2 (Hines-Ike 20 og, Ordaz 79)
Austin FC 1 (Gallagher 63)

Western Conference First Round – Match 2

Nov 1 – Portland
Portland Timbers 2 (Velde 18, Guerra 90+8)
San Diego FC 2 (Pellegrino 45+12, Lozano 51)
Portland Timbers win 3-2 on pens

Nov 1 – Frisco
FC Dallas 1 (Musa 25)
Vancouver Whitecaps 1 (Priso 90+3)
Whitecaps win 4-2 on pens and the series 2-0

Nov 2 – Austin
Austin FC 1 (Pereira 45+6 pen)
LAFC 4 (Son Heung-min 21, Bouanga 25, 44, Ebobisse 90+3)
LAFC win the series 2-0

Nov 3 – Seattle
Seattle Sounders 4 (Vargas 8, 86, Morris 21, Musovski 41)
Minnesota United 2 (Triantis 45+1, Lod 45+5)

Western Conference First Round – Match 3

Nov 8 – St Paul
Minnesota United 3 (Pereyra 19, Diaz 62, Markanich 71)
Seattle Sounders 3 (Rusnak 5, Musovski 8, Morris 88)
Minnesota win 7-6 on pens and the series 2-1

Nov 9 – San Diego
San Diego FC 4 (Dreyer 5, 79, Pellegrino 17, 53)
Portland Timbers 0
San Diego FC win the series 2-1

Eastern Conference Semi-Finals

Nov 23 – Cincinnati
FC Cincinnati 0
Inter Miami 4 (Messi 19, Silvetti 57, Allende 62, 74)

Nov 23 – Chester
Philadelphia Union 0
New York City FC 1 (Moralez 27)

Western Conference Semi-Finals

Nov 22 – Vancouver
Vancouver Whitecaps 2 (Sabbi 39, Laborda 45+1)
LAFC 2 (Son Heung-min 60, 90+5)
After Extra-Time; Whitecaps win 4-3 on pens

Nov 24 – San Diego
San Diego FC 1 (Dreyer 72)
Minnesota United 0

Eastern Conference Final

Nov 29 – Fort Lauderdale
Inter Miami 5 (Allende 14, 23, 89, Silvetti 67, Segovia 83)
New York City FC 1 (Haak 37)

Western Conference Final

Nov 29 – San Diego
San Diego FC 1 (Lozano 60)
Vancouver Whitecaps 3 (White 8, 45+2, Sisniega 11 og)

MLS Cup 2025

Dec 6 – Fort Lauderdale
Inter Miami 3 (Ocampo 8 og, De Paul 71, Allende 90+6)
Vancouver Whitecaps 1 (Ahmed 60)

BELIZE

Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Verdes* (C)	12	9	3	0	31	4	30
Port Layola*	12	6	3	3	32	21	21
Progresso*	12	6	2	4	31	16	20
Belmopan*	12	5	3	4	21	10	18
Napoles	12	4	2	6	21	22	14
Wagiya	12	4	2	6	22	28	14
Benque Viejo United	12	0	1	11	6	63	1

*Advance to finals stage

Semi-Finals

Nov 22-23:
Progresso 2-1 Port Layola; Belmopan 0-1 Verdes
Nov 30-Dec 5: Verdes 2-1 Belmopan (agg 3-1); Port Layola 1-2 Progresso (agg 2-4)

Final

Dec 7: Progresso 0-0 Verdes
Dec 14: Verdes 1-0 Progresso (agg 1-0)

COSTA RICA

Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Alajuelense* (C)	18	12	4	2	29	10	40
Saprissa*	18	10	4	4	32	20	34
Cartagines*	18	7	7	4	19	12	28
Liberia*	18	7	6	5	20	21	27
Herediano	18	7	5	6	22	22	26
Perez Zeledon	18	6	5	7	25	28	23
Puntarenas	18	4	9	5	22	21	21
Sporting	18	3	7	8	15	19	16
Guadalupe	18	2	7	9	17	32	13
San Carlos	18	3	4	11	15	31	13

*Advance to finals stage

Semi-Finals

Dec 11-12:
Liberia 1-1 Alajuelense; Cartagines 1-2 Saprissa
Dec 14: Alajuelense 3-0 Liberia (agg 4-1); Saprissa 2-1 Cartagines (agg 4-2)

Final

Dec 18: Saprissa 2-2 Alajuelense
Dec 21: Alajuelense 3-1 Saprissa (agg 5-3)

EL SALVADOR

Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Luis Angel Firpo* (C)	22	15	5	2	49	26	50
FAS*	22	13	5	4	49	25	44
Alianza*	22	13	5	4	37	20	44
Isidro Metapan*	22	10	6	6	31	26	36
Aguila*	22	9	6	7	28	26	33
Municipal Limeno*	22	8	4	10	30	32	28
Cacahuatique*	22	7	6	9	28	29	27
Platense*	22	5	11	6	30	27	26
Fuerte San Francisco	22	4	8	10	20	38	20
Zacatecoluca	22	4	6	12	18	28	18
Hercules	22	5	2	15	19	49	17
Inter	22	2	10	10	22	35	16

*Advance to finals stage

Quarter-Finals

Nov 23: Platense 0-2 Luis Angel Firpo; Aguila 2-1 Isidro Metapan; Municipal Limeno 0-0 Alianza; Cacahuatique 2-3 FAS
Nov 30: Luis Angel Firpo 6-2 Platense (agg 8-2); Isidro Metapan 0-2 Aguila (agg 1-4); Alianza 3-0 Municipal Limeno (agg 3-0); FAS 0-2 Cacahuatique (agg 3-4)

Semi-Finals

Dec 7: Aguila 1-3 Luis Angel Firpo; Cacahuatique 1-2 Alianza
Dec 14: Luis Angel Firpo 0-1 Aguila (agg 3-2); Alianza 3-0 Cacahuatique (agg 5-1)

Final

Dec 21: Luis Angel Firpo 0-0 Alianza
(AET, Luis Angel Firpo win 5-4 on pens)

GRENADA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
St John's (C)	18	13	5	0	40	14	44
Paradise	18	11	4	3	36	12	37
Hurricanes	18	11	3	4	34	16	36
St David's	18	10	2	6	35	29	32
Camerhogne	17	7	1	9	34	32	22
Hard Rock	18	5	4	9	28	40	19
Queen's Park Rangers	17	5	3	9	23	33	18
SAB Spartans	17	5	2	10	25	41	17
North Stars (R)	18	4	2	12	27	49	14
Shamrock (R)	17	2	4	11	22	38	10

GUATEMALA

Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Municipal*	22	14	6	2	41	14	48
Mixco*	22	14	2	6	33	20	44
Antigua* (C)	22	13	3	6	39	23	42
Aurora*	22	11	6	5	31	28	39
Malacateco*	22	10	1	11	26	31	31
Xelaju*	22	8	4	10	32	29	28
Achuapa*	22	6	7	9	22	29	25
Mictlan*	22	6	6	10	21	23	24
Marquense	22	6	5	11	17	35	23
Coban Imperial	22	6	5	11	21	26	23
Guastatoya	22	6	4	12	23	37	22
Comunicaciones	22	5	5	12	15	26	20

*Advance to finals stage

Quarter-Finals

Dec 6-9:
Mictlan 0-1 Municipal; Achuapa 3-2 Mixco; Xelaju 1-0 Antigua; Malacateco 1-0 Aurora
Dec 10-12: Aurora 2-1 Malacateco (agg 2-2, *Aurora advance as higher-seeded team);* Municipal 2-0 Mictlan (agg 3-0); Mixco 0-0 Achuapa (agg 2-3); Antigua 2-0 Xelaju (agg 2-1)

Semi-Finals

Dec 14:
Achuapa 1-1 Municipal; Aurora 0-1 Antigua
Dec 18-19: Antigua 4-2 Aurora (agg 5-2); Municipal 3-0 Achuapa (agg 4-1)

Final

Dec 22: Antigua 2-0 Municipal
Dec 28: Municipal 1-0 Antigua (agg 1-2)

HONDURAS

Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Olimpia* (C)	20	13	5	2	45	27	44
Marathon*	20	12	6	2	41	15	42
Motagua*	20	10	5	5	39	32	35
Platense*	20	8	5	7	34	20	29
Real Espana*	20	8	5	7	29	22	29
Olancho*	20	6	9	5	38	30	27
UPNFM	20	6	8	6	24	30	26
Juticalpa	20	6	7	7	28	42	21
Genesis	20	4	6	10	29	35	18
Victoria	20	4	2	14	23	42	14
Choloma	20	3	2	15	22	57	11

*Advance to next stage

Semi-Final Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Olimpia*	4	3	1	0	5	1	10
Real Espana	4	1	1	2	4	3	4
Motagua	4	0	2	2	2	7	2

*Advance to final

Semi-Final Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Marathon*	4	3	1	0	10	3	10
Olancho	4	1	1	2	5	7	4
Platense	4	0	2	2	4	9	2

*Advance to final

Final

Jan 1: Marathon 2-2 Olimpia
Jan 8: Olimpia 1-0 Marathon (agg 3-2)

MEXICO

Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Toluca* (C)	17	11	4	2	43	18	37
Tigres UANL*	17	10	6	1	35	16	36
Cruz Azul*	17	10	5	2	32	20	35
America*	17	10	4	3	33	18	34
Monterrey*	17	9	4	4	33	29	31
Guadalajara*	17	9	2	6	29	22	29
Tijuana**	17	6	6	5	29	23	24
Juarez**	17	6	5	6	27	28	23
Pachuca**	17	6	4	7	21	21	22
Pumas UNAM**	17	5	6	6	24	25	21
Santos Laguna	17	6	2	9	22	28	20
Queretaro	17	6	2	9	19	29	20
Necaxa	17	4	5	8	24	32	17
Atlas	17	4	5	8	24	35	17
Atletico San Luis	17	5	1	11	25	29	16
Mazatlan	17	2	8	7	20	29	14
Leon	17	3	4	10	14	31	13
Puebla	17	3	3	11	21	42	12

*Advance to quarter-finals
**Advance to play-in round

Play-Ins

Nov 20:
Tijuana 3-1 Juarez; Pachuca 3-1 Pumas UNAM

Play-Ins

Nov 23: Juarez 2-1 Pachuca

Quarter-Finals

Nov 26-27: Juarez 1-2 Toluca; Tijuana 3-0 Tigres UANL; Monterrey 2-0 America; Guadalajara 0-0 Cruz Azul
Nov 29-30: Toluca 0-0 Juarez (agg 2-1); Tigres UANL 5-0 Tijuana (agg 5-3); America 2-1 Monterrey (agg 2-3); Cruz Azul 3-2 Guadalajara (agg 3-2)

Semi-Finals

Dec 3:
Monterrey 1-0 Toluca;
Cruz Azul 1-1 Tigres UANL
Dec 6:
Toluca 3-2 Monterrey (agg 3-3, *Toluca advance as higher-seeded team*);
Tigres UANL 1-1 Cruz Azul (agg 2-2, *Tigres UANL advance as higher-seeded team*)

Final

Dec 11 – San Nicolas de los Garza
Tigres UANL 1 (Correa 46)
Toluca 0

Dec 14 – Toluca
Toluca 2 (Helinho 40, Paulinho 52)
Tigres UANL 1 (Gorriaran 14)
After Extra-Time; 2-2 on aggregate
Toluca win 9-8 on pens

NICARAGUA

Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Diriangen* (C)	18	10	6	2	48	15	36
Managua*	18	11	3	4	32	13	36
Real Esteli**	18	9	6	3	26	14	33
Club Sebaco**	18	9	3	6	30	29	30
Matagalpa**	18	8	4	6	29	26	28
Walter Ferretti**	18	7	5	6	31	26	26
Municipal Jalapa	18	7	3	8	33	33	24
Rancho Santana	18	5	2	11	17	47	17
UNAN Managua	18	3	3	12	20	41	12
Real Madriz	18	3	1	14	16	38	10

*Advance to semi-finals
**Advance to quarter-finals

Quarter-Finals

Nov 27-28: Club Sebaco 2-0 Matagalpa; Real Esteli 2-1 Walter Ferretti

Semi-Finals

Nov 30-Dec 1: Club Sebaco 0-1 Diriangen; Real Esteli 0-2 Managua
Dec 7: Diriangen 5-0 Club Sebaco (agg 6-0); Managua 1-2 Real Esteli (agg 3-2)

Final

Dec 14: Managua 0-0 Diriangen
Dec 21: Diriangen 1-0 Managua (agg 1-0)

PANAMA

Clausura East

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Plaza Amador* (C)	16	11	3	2	37	17	36
Alianza**	16	8	4	4	25	19	28
Sporting San Miguelito**	16	6	7	3	17	12	25
Arabe Unido	16	6	6	4	18	13	24
UMECIT	16	6	5	5	16	18	23
Tauro	16	3	4	9	17	28	13

*Advance to semi-finals
**Advance to quarter-finals

Clausura West

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
San Francisco*	16	6	7	3	21	16	25
Independiente**	16	6	5	5	22	17	23
Deportivo Universitario**	16	4	7	5	14	17	19
Veraguas	16	5	3	8	19	23	18
Atletico Nacional	16	4	5	7	22	31	17
Herrera	16	1	4	11	10	27	7

*Advance to semi-finals
**Advance to quarter-finals

Quarter-Finals

Nov 12-13: Independiente 2-1 Sporting San Miguelito; Alianza 3-2 Deportivo Universitario

Semi-Finals

Nov 16: Independiente 2-2 Plaza Amador; Alianza 1-1 San Francisco
Nov 22-23: San Francisco 1-2 Alianza (agg 2-3); Plaza Amador 4-0 Independiente (agg 6-2)

Final

Nov 29: Plaza Amador 2-0 Alianza

PUERTO RICO

Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ponce*	18	15	1	2	66	16	46
Metropolitan*	18	14	0	4	80	18	42
Academia Quintana* (C)	18	13	3	2	88	27	42
PR Surf*	18	12	1	5	61	18	37
Caguas Sporting	18	12	0	6	65	28	36
Taurinos	18	7	2	9	36	34	23
Edusoccer	18	4	1	13	24	80	13
San Juan	18	3	2	13	27	73	11
Mayaguez	18	3	1	14	24	111	10
Guayama	18	1	1	16	10	76	4

*Advance to finals stage

Semi-Finals

Dec 7-8: Ponce 1-2 PR Surf;
Academia Quintana 1-0 Metropolitan

Final

Dec 14: Academia Quintana 1-0 PR Surf

2026 CONCACAF CHAMPIONS CUP

First Round Draw

San Diego FC (USA) v Pumas UNAM (Mex);
Sporting San Miguelito (Pan) v LA Galaxy (USA);
Vancouver FC (Can) v Cruz Azul (Mex);
Xelaju (Gua) v Monterrey (Mex);
Real Espana (Hon) v LAFC (USA);
Atletico Ottawa (Can) v Nashville SC (USA);
Olimpia (Hon) v America (Mex);
Defence Force (Tri) v Philadelphia Union (USA);
Cartagines (Crc) v Vancouver Whitecaps (Can);
O&M (Dom) v FC Cincinnati (USA);
Forge FC (Can) v Tigres UANL (Mex)

• *Home and away ties to take place in February*

Toluca (Mex), Inter Miami (USA), Alajuelense (Crc), Mount Pleasant (Jam) and Seattle Sounders (USA) all receives byes to March's round of 16

ASIA

2025-26 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE

West Region

Matchday 6

Dec 22 – Sharjah
Sharjah (UAE) 0
Al Hilal (KSA) 1 (Malcom 81)

Dec 22 – Tabriz
Tractor (Irn) 2 (Khalilzadeh 51, Hosseinzadeh 90+2)
Al Duhail (Qat) 1 (Bourigeaud 35 pen)

Dec 22 – Baghdad
Al Shorta (Irq) 0
Al Ahli (KSA) 5 (Ibanez 30, Toney 56, Galeno 72, Abu Al Shamat 81, Al Johani 86)

Dec 22 – Al Rayyan
Al Gharafa (Qat) 1 (Sano 87)
Al Wahda (UAE) 0

Dec 23 – Doha
Al Sadd (Qat) 4 (Mujica 75, 90+11, 90+13, Salman 90+5)
Shabab Al Ahli (UAE) 2 (Cartabia 47, Al Ghassani 70 pen)

Dec 23 – Jeddah
Al Ittihad (KSA) 1 (Benzema 57)
Nasaf (Uzb) 0

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Hilal	6	6	0	0	15	5	18
Tractor	6	4	2	0	10	2	14
Al Ahli	6	4	1	1	17	6	13
Al Wahda	6	4	1	1	10	5	13
Shabab Al Ahli	6	3	1	2	11	10	10
Al Ittihad	6	3	0	3	11	8	9
Al Duhail	6	2	1	3	13	12	7
Sharjah	6	2	1	3	6	13	7
Al Gharafa	6	2	0	4	7	12	6
Al Sadd	6	1	2	3	9	12	5
Al Shorta	6	0	1	5	2	17	1
Nasaf	6	0	0	6	6	15	0

East Region

Matchday 6

Dec 9 – Kobe
Vissel Kobe (Jpn) 2 (Muto 18, Sasaki 90 pen)
Chengdu Rongcheng (Chn) 2 (Felipe 45+1, 77 pen)

Dec 9 – Machida
Machida Zelvia (Jpn) 3 (Masuyama 6, Nishimura 21, Oh Se-hun 47)
Ulsan HD (Kor) 1 (Um Won-sang 55)

Dec 9 – Buriram
Buriram United (Tha) 2 (Ko Myeong-seok 58, Suphanat 65)
Gangwon FC (Kor) 2 (Mo Jae-hyeon 33, Kim Dae-won 74 pen)

Dec 9 – Iskandar Puteri
Johor Darul Ta'zim (Mas) 0
Shanghai Port (Chn) 0

Dec 10 – Hiroshima
Sanfrecce Hiroshima (Jpn) 1 (Araki 78)
Shanghai Shenhua (Chn) 0

Dec 10 – Seoul
FC Seoul (Kor) 1 (Lingard 31)
Melbourne City (Aus) 1 (Kanamori 74)

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Vissel Kobe	6	4	1	1	12	6	13
Machida Zelvia	6	3	2	1	10	5	11
Sanfrecce Hiroshima	6	3	2	1	6	3	11
Melbourne City	6	3	1	2	7	6	10
FC Seoul	6	2	3	1	8	5	9
Johor Darul Ta'zim	6	2	2	2	6	5	8
Buriram United	6	2	2	2	7	8	8
Ulsan HD	6	2	2	2	5	6	8
Gangwon FC	6	2	1	3	9	11	7
Chengdu Rongcheng	6	1	3	2	5	7	6
Shanghai Shenhua	6	1	1	4	5	9	4
Shanghai Port	6	0	2	4	2	11	2

2025-26 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TWO

West Region

Group A

Nov 26: Esteghlal (Irn) 1-1 Al Wasl (UAE)
Dec 24: Al Wasl (UAE) 2-1 Al Wehdat (Jor);
Al Muharraq (Bhr) 0-3 Esteghlal (Irn)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Wasl (Q)	6	4	2	0	15	6	14
Esteghlal (Q)	6	2	2	2	8	10	8
Al Muharraq	6	2	1	3	8	8	7
Al Wehdat	6	1	1	4	5	12	4

Group B

Nov 26: Andijon (Uzb) 1-1 Arkadag (Tkm)
Dec 24: Arkadag (Tkm) 1-0 Al Khaldiya (Bhr);
Al Ahli (Qat) 2-0 Andijon (Uzb)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Ahli (Q)	6	2	4	0	7	4	10
Arkadag (Q)	6	1	4	1	5	6	7
Al Khaldiya	6	1	3	2	3	3	6
Andijon	6	0	5	1	1	3	5

Group C

Nov 25: Sepahan (Irn) 2-0 Al Hussein (Jor)
Dec 23: Al Hussein (Jor) 3-1 Ahal (Tkm)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Hussein (Q)	4	3	0	1	8	4	9
Sepahan (Q)	4	2	1	1	5	3	7
Ahal	4	0	1	3	4	10	1
Mohun Bagan*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

*Considered withdrawn

Group D

Nov 26: Istiklol (Tjk) 0-4 Al Nassr (KSA);
Al Zawraa (Irq) 2-1 Goa (Ind)
Dec 24: Goa (Ind) 1-2 Istiklol (Tjk);
Al Nassr (KSA) 5-1 Al Zawraa (Irq)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Nassr (Q)	6	6	0	0	22	2	18
Al Zawraa (Q)	6	3	0	3	8	11	9
Istiklol	6	3	0	3	7	13	9
Goa	6	0	0	6	3	14	0

East Region

Group E

Nov 27: Macarthur (Aus) 2-1 Tai Po (Hkg);
Cong An Ha Noi (Vie) 2-1 Beijing Guoan (Chn)
Dec 11: Tai Po (Hkg) 1-0 Cong An Ha Noi (Vie);
Beijing Guoan (Chn) 1-2 Macarthur (Aus)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Macarthur (Q)	6	4	1	1	13	7	13
Cong An Ha Noi (Q)	6	2	2	2	9	7	8
Tai Po	6	2	1	3	8	14	7
Beijing Guoan	6	1	2	3	10	12	5

Group F

Nov 27: Eastern (Hkg) 0-5 Gamba Osaka (Jpn); Ratchaburi (Tha) 2-0 Nam Dinh (Vie)
Dec 11: Nam Dinh (Vie) 9-0 Eastern (Hkg);
Gamba Osaka (Jpn) 2-0 Ratchaburi (Tha)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Gamba Osaka (Q)	6	6	0	0	16	2	18
Ratchaburi (Q)	6	3	0	3	15	8	9
Nam Dinh	6	3	0	3	14	7	9
Easter	6	0	0	6	2	30	0

Group G

Nov 26:
Bangkok United (Tha) 1-1 Selangor (Mas);
Lion City Sailors (Sgp) 3-2 Persib Bandung (Idn)
Dec 10:
Selangor (Mas) 0-1 Lion City Sailors (Sgp);
Persib Bandung (Idn) 1-0 Bangkok United (Tha)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Persib (Q)	6	4	1	1	11	6	13
Bangkok Utd (Q)	6	3	1	2	8	7	10
Lion City Sailors	6	3	1	2	10	8	10
Selangor	6	0	1	5	7	15	1

Group H

Nov 27:
Pohang Steelers (Kor) 2-0 BG Pathum United (Tha); Tampines Rovers (Sgp) 5-3 Kaya–Iloilo (Phi)
Dec 11:
BG Pathum United (Tha) 0-2 Tampines Rovers (Sgp); Kaya–Iloilo (Phi) 0-1 Pohang Steelers (Kor)

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tampines Rovers (Q)	6	5	1	0	14	5	16
Pohang Steelers (Q)	6	4	1	1	7	2	13
BG Pathum United	6	2	0	4	5	8	6
Kaya–Iloilo	6	0	0	6	4	15	0

2025-26 GULF CLUB CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Group A

Dec 23: Al Ain (UAE) 0-1 Zakho (Irq);
Al Qadsia (Kuw) 2-1 Sitra (Bhr)

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Zakho	4	3	1	0	6	1	10
Al Ain	4	2	0	2	5	4	6
Al Qadsia	4	1	1	2	3	5	4
Sitra	4	0	2	2	2	6	2

Group B

Dec 23-24:
Al Shabab (KSA) 2-2 Al Rayyan (Qat); Al Tadamun Hadramaut (Yem) 0-1 Al Nahda (Oma)

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Rayyan	4	1	3	0	9	4	6
Al Nahda	4	1	3	0	4	3	6
Al Tadamun	4	1	1	2	3	7	4
Al Shabab	4	0	3	1	4	6	3

JAPAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Kashima Antlers (C)	38	23	7	8	58	31	76
Kashiwa Reysol	38	21	12	5	60	34	75
Kyoto Sanga	38	19	11	8	62	40	68
Sanfrecce Hiroshima	38	20	8	10	46	28	68
Vissel Kobe	38	18	10	10	46	33	64
Machida Zelvia	38	17	9	12	52	38	60
Urawa Red Diamonds	38	16	11	11	45	39	59
Kawasaki Frontale	38	15	12	11	66	56	57
Gamba Osaka	38	17	6	15	53	55	57
Cerezo Osaka	38	14	10	14	60	57	52
FC Tokyo	38	13	11	14	41	48	50
Avispa Fukuoka	38	12	12	14	34	38	48
Fagiano Okayama	38	12	9	17	33	42	45
Shimizu S-Pulse	38	11	11	16	41	51	44
Yokohama F. Marinos	38	12	7	19	46	47	43
Nagoya Grampus	38	11	10	17	44	56	43
Tokyo Verdy	38	11	10	17	23	41	43
Yokohama FC (R)	38	9	8	21	27	45	35
Shonan Bellmare (R)	38	8	8	22	36	63	32
Albirex Niigata (R)	38	4	12	22	36	67	24

TAJIKISTAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Istiklol (C)	22	15	5	2	58	18	50
Vakhsh Bokhtar	22	12	9	1	33	18	45
CSKA Pamir	22	10	7	5	38	23	37
Ravshan Kulob	22	8	11	3	26	20	35
Khujand	22	9	4	9	24	25	31
Eskhata	22	7	9	6	31	30	30
Regar-TadAZ	22	8	6	8	25	24	30
Barkchi Hisor	22	6	9	7	22	20	27
Hosilot Farkhor	22	6	6	10	27	38	24
Istaravshan	22	4	7	11	23	42	19
Hulbuk* (R)	22	2	7	13	15	39	13
Panjshir (R)	22	2	6	14	16	41	12

*Enter promotion-relegation play-off

Promotion-Relegation Play-Off

Dec 7: Hulbuk 2-2 Sardor Tursunzade
Dec 10: Sardor Tursunzade 2-0 Hulbuk (agg 4-2)

TURKMENISTAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Arkadag (C)	28	28	0	0	105	15	84
Ahal	28	17	4	7	54	26	55
Altyn Asyr	28	16	5	7	54	35	53
Sagadam	28	12	7	9	32	32	43
Nebitci	28	9	6	13	22	41	33
Asgabat	28	7	3	18	23	54	24
Kopetdag Asgabat	28	3	5	20	21	72	14
Merw	28	2	6	20	16	52	12

AFRICA

MALAWI

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mighty Wanderers (C)	30	20	9	1	51	14	69
Nyasa Big Bullets	30	21	3	6	60	20	66
Silver Strikers	30	18	10	2	50	18	64
Blue Eagles	30	13	9	8	38	30	48
CIVO United	30	13	8	9	39	21	47
Karonga United	30	13	5	12	31	28	44
Ekhaya	30	13	3	14	36	28	42
Creck	30	11	9	10	25	27	42
Moyale Barracks	30	10	10	10	28	40	40
Kamuzu Barracks	30	11	6	13	31	35	39
Chitipa United	30	9	10	11	23	30	37
Dedza Dynamos	30	8	8	14	24	33	32
MAFCO	30	8	7	15	29	37	31
Mzuzu City Hammers	30	7	7	16	26	49	28
Mighty Tigers (R)	30	6	9	15	21	35	27
Songwe Border (R)	30	1	3	26	10	77	6

MOZAMBIQUE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
UD Songo (C)	22	18	3	1	50	13	57
Black Bulls	23	11	6	6	35	26	39
Ferroviario Beira	23	10	7	6	19	13	37
Ferroviario Lichinga	22	9	7	6	38	31	34
Ferroviario Maputo	23	7	12	4	25	18	33
Baia de Pemba	22	9	5	8	24	21	32
Vilankulo	24	7	10	7	22	21	31
Costa do Sol	23	7	10	6	18	18	31
Ferroviario Nacala	23	8	7	8	16	17	31
Chingale de Tete	22	6	9	7	22	21	27
Ferroviario Nampula	22	6	8	8	21	29	26
Textafrica (R)	23	4	8	11	15	30	20
Nacala (R)	20	2	6	12	13	31	12
Desportivo Matola (R)	22	2	4	16	11	40	10

• *Season concluded early*

OCEANIA

NEW ZEALAND

Northern League

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Western Springs*	22	13	3	6	44	30	42
Birkenhead United*	22	12	5	5	55	33	41
Auckland United*	22	12	4	6	47	32	40
Auckland City*	22	12	4	6	35	24	40
Eastern Suburbs	22	12	4	6	35	27	40
East Coast Bays	22	10	6	6	32	27	36
Tauranga City	22	9	3	10	42	38	30
Bay Olympic	22	6	6	10	26	36	24
Auckland FC Reserves*	22	6	5	11	33	37	23
Fencibles United	22	5	6	11	37	49	21
Manurewa (R)	22	4	4	14	24	57	16
West Coast Rangers (R)	22	3	6	13	26	46	15

*Advance to national championship

Central League

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Wellington Olympic*	18	16	1	1	64	14	49
Miramar Rangers*	18	12	3	3	53	22	39
Western Suburbs*	18	10	4	4	57	24	34
Wellington Phoenix Reserves*	18	8	5	5	44	26	29
Napier City Rovers	18	8	4	6	45	24	28
Island Bay United	18	5	4	9	32	32	19
Waterside Karori	18	4	4	10	29	70	16
Upper Hutt City	18	3	5	10	20	50	14
Petone	18	4	1	13	20	47	13
North Wellington (R)	18	1	7	10	29	76	10

*Advance to national championship

Southern League

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Coastal Spirit*	18	14	0	4	56	21	42
Christchurch United*	18	12	4	2	66	13	40
Cashmere Technical	18	12	3	3	59	29	39
Nelson Suburbs	18	9	3	6	42	27	30
Nomads United	18	8	4	6	44	35	28
Ferrymead Bays	18	8	4	6	33	32	28
Dunedin City Royals	18	7	5	6	39	31	26
Wanaka	18	5	0	13	23	58	15
University of Canterbury	18	1	2	15	20	78	5
Selwyn United (R)	18	0	3	15	20	78	3

*Advance to national championship

National Championship

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Wellington Olympic*	10	7	0	3	23	14	21
Auckland City* (C)	10	6	2	2	19	14	20
Miramar Rangers	10	6	1	3	25	14	19
Auckland FC Reserves	10	5	3	2	17	10	18
Western Springs	10	5	1	4	16	13	16
Birkenhead United	10	5	0	5	20	21	15
Christchurch United	10	4	2	4	16	19	14
Western Suburbs	10	3	1	6	19	21	10
Wellington Phoenix Reserves	10	3	1	6	18	21	10
Auckland United	10	2	2	6	11	19	8
Coastal Spirit	10	2	1	7	5	23	7

*Advance to grand final

Grand Final

Dec 13 – Wellington
Wellington Olympic 2 (Stoupe 90+3, Prins 101)
Auckland City 2 (Ellis 81, Gray 120+2)
After Extra-Time; Auckland City win 7-6 on pens

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lae City*	20	15	5	0	49	17	50
PRK Komara Gulf* (C)	20	11	7	2	51	19	40
Hekari United*	19	12	3	4	34	14	39
Morobe Wawens*	19	11	3	5	32	19	36
Port Moresby Strikers	20	8	8	4	38	28	32
Admiralty Islands	20	9	5	6	33	33	32
United Highlands	20	7	7	6	29	21	28
Kula	20	6	2	12	28	38	20
Lae City Dwellers	19	3	1	15	30	46	10
Star Mountain	19	2	2	15	20	66	8
Blue Kumuls	20	1	3	16	14	57	6

*Advance to finals stage

Semi-Finals

Dec 7: PRK Komara Gulf 3-0 Hekari United; Lae City 1-1 Morobe Wawens (*Morobe Wawens win 5-4 on pens*)

Third Place Play-Off

Dec 13: Lae City 3-0 (*awarded*) Hekari United

Final

Dec 13: Morobe Wawens 1-3 PRK Komara Gulf

Internationals

2025 FIFA ARAB CUP

Group A

Dec 1 – Al Rayyan
Tunisia 0
Syria 1 (Khribin 48)

Dec 1 – Al Khor
Qatar 0
Palestine 1 (Al Brake 90+5 og)

Dec 4 – Lusail
Palestine 2 (Hamdan 61, Qunbar 85)
Tunisia 2 (Layouni 16, Chaouat 51)

Dec 4 – Al Rayyan
Syria 1 (Khribin 48)
Qatar 1 (Alaaeldin 77)

Dec 7 – Al Khor
Qatar 0
Tunisia 3 (Ben Romdhane 16, Meriah 62, Ben Ali 90+4)

Dec 7 – Al Rayyan
Syria 0
Palestine 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Palestine (Q)	3	1	2	0	3	2	5
Syria (Q)	3	1	2	0	2	1	5
Tunisia	3	1	1	1	5	3	4
Qatar	3	0	1	2	1	5	1

Group B

Dec 2 – Al Rayyan
Morocco 3 (Bouftini 5, Tissoudali 11, El Berkaoui 45+4)
Comoros 1 (Boulacsoute 56 og)

Dec 2 – Al Rayyan
Saudi Arabia 2 (Al Buraikan 55, Al Shehri 77)
Oman 1 (Al Habashi 70)

Dec 5 – Al Rayyan
Oman 0
Morocco 0

Dec 5 – Al Khor
Comoros 1 (Djoudja 63)
Saudi Arabia 3 (Kanno 45+4, 51, S. Al Dawsari 76)

Dec 8 – Lusail
Morocco 1 (El Berkaoui 11)
Saudi Arabia 0

Dec 8 – Doha
Oman 2 (Al Sabhi 30, 43)
Comoros 1 (Hamidou 68)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Morocco (Q)	3	2	1	0	4	1	7
Saudi Arabia (Q)	3	2	0	1	5	3	6
Oman	3	1	1	1	3	3	4
Comoros	3	0	0	3	3	8	0

Group C

Dec 2 – Lusail
Egypt 1 (Afsha 87 pen)
Kuwait 1 (Al Hajeri 64)

Dec 3 – Al Khor
Jordan 2 (Olwan 20 pen, Al Naimat 63)
United Arab Emirates 1 (Bruno 47)

Dec 6 – Al Rayyan
Kuwait 1 (Nasser 84)
Jordan 3 (Abu Taha 17, Al Rosan 49, Olwan 90+7 pen)

Dec 6 – Lusail
United Arab Emirates 1 (Caio Lucas 60)
Egypt 1 (Hamdy 85)

Dec 9 – Al Khor
Egypt 0
Jordan 3 (Abu Hashish 19, Abu Zrayq 41, Olwan 90+2 pen)

Dec 9 – Doha
United Arab Emirates 3 (Al Ghassani 16 pen, 18, Gimenez 66)
Kuwait 1 (Al Hajeri 59)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Jordan (Q)	3	3	0	0	8	2	9
UAE (Q)	3	1	1	1	5	4	4
Egypt	3	0	2	1	2	5	2
Kuwait	3	0	1	2	3	7	1

Group D

Dec 3 – Al Rayyan
Algeria 0
Sudan 0

Dec 3 – Doha
Iraq 2 (Lutfalla 10 og, M. Ali 25)
Bahrain 1 (Hashim 79)

Dec 6 – Al Rayyan
Bahrain 1 (Abduljabbar 27)
Algeria 5 (Berkane 24, 48, Boulbina 30, 80, Benzia 45+7 pen)

Dec 6 – Doha
Sudan 0
Iraq 2 (M. Ali 81, Attwan 84)

Dec 9 – Al Rayyan
Algeria 2 (Tougai 45+1, Natiq 46 og)
Iraq 0

Dec 9 – Al Rayyan
Bahrain 3 (Abduljabbar 37, Al Romaihi 79 pen, Al Humaidan 89)
Sudan 1 (Muzamel 72)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Algeria (Q)	3	2	1	0	7	1	7
Iraq (Q)	3	2	0	1	4	3	6
Bahrain	3	1	0	2	5	8	3
Sudan	3	0	1	2	1	5	1

Quarter-Finals

Dec 11 – Al Rayyan
Morocco 1 (Azaro 79)
Syria 0

Dec 11 – Lusail
Palestine 1 (Dabbagh 64)
Saudi Arabia 2 (Al Buraikan 58 pen, Kanno 115)
After Extra-Time

Dec 12 – Al Rayyan
Jordan 1 (Olwan pen 41)
Iraq 0

Dec 12 – Al Khor
Algeria 1 (Boulbina 46)
United Arab Emirates 1 (Bruno 64)
After Extra-Time; UAE win 7-6 on pens

Semi-Finals

Dec 15 – Al Rayyan
Morocco 3 (El Berkaoui 28, El Mahdioui 83, Hamdallah 90+2)
United Arab Emirates 0

Dec 15 – Al Khor
Saudi Arabia 0
Jordan 1 (Al Rashdan 66)

Third Place Play-Off

Dec 18 – Al Rayyan
Saudi Arabia -
United Arab Emirates -
Match abandoned

Final

Dec 18 – Lusail
Jordan 2 (Olwan 48, 68 pen)
Morocco 3 (Tannane 4, Hamdallah 88, 100)
After Extra-Time

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Sandro

Tottenham Hotspur v Milan

2010-11 Champions League, London, England

Spurs' run to the knockout stages of the 2010-11 Champions League - after topping their group ahead of Internazionale – was a historic achievement for the club, and their Brazilian midfielder was at the heart of one of its defining matches

"When we were drawn against Milan, nobody expected us to go through. They had so many great players – Nesta, Thiago Silva, Seedorf, Robinho, Pato, Ibrahimovic – and we knew we'd have to be better than perfect to beat those guys.

It was my first season in England and it was difficult for me. In Brazil, I'd been a star. I'd won the Copa Libertadores with Internacional and I was also playing for the national team. I was only young and I knew Tottenham had a lot of amazing players, especially in midfield, but I was still expecting to play. How crazy is that? For the first few months, I struggled, but I kept working hard to try to impress.

The Champions League is unique. It's the biggest club competition in the world and everybody is watching. This was a huge opportunity for me to face some of the best players around and show that I belonged at that level.

The first leg at the San Siro felt like a dream. I had a great battle with Gennaro Gattuso, a World Cup winner who I'd grown up watching. He also had that fight with Joe Jordan, our assistant manager. We won 1-0 and I was involved in the action that led to Peter Crouch's goal.

We knew Milan would come at us with everything they had in the second leg. There were some nerves, but we were at home. European nights at White Hart Lane always felt special and we knew that we'd qualify if we stopped them from scoring.

Mentally and physically, I was so prepared to play Milan. This was the night to show everybody in the stadium that they could trust me. My family, and everybody in Brazil, was watching too.

This was the biggest game Tottenham had played in a long time and the fans were amazing. You couldn't beat that atmosphere. We ran more and worked harder for them.

I played alongside Wilson Palacios at the San Siro and we won the midfield battle. I thought Harry Redknapp might keep us together, but Luka Modric was so good that he had to play. Thank God the manager didn't drop me!

I was playing in front of the defence so I knew I would be very important for the team. I had to make things difficult for Milan. Fortunately, I managed to have one of my best-ever games. I was right in the middle of everything, putting all my energy into stopping them from getting into dangerous areas. I made so many tackles and interceptions that night.

We knew we were going to suffer because of the quality of their team, and there were moments when they were right on top of us and it felt like they might score, but they never did.

The game was more of a mental challenge than anything else. We weren't going to give up, and we kept encouraging each other. The back four were perfect. Heurelho Gomes made some great saves and William Gallas even cleared the ball off the line. Everybody did their bit.

Remembering that feeling at the final whistle makes me want to cry. I looked back at Michael Dawson and I celebrated with him. We screamed like crazy for a few seconds and then we hugged.

"Remembering that feeling at the final whistle makes me want to cry"

I felt a connection with the fans and to be named Man of the Match made me so proud. I needed a massive game like that to prove myself. After that, I started being picked every week. If I had the chance to go back through any game in my career, it would be this one, 100%."

Interview by Sean Cole

"One of my best-ever games"...Sandro in action during Spurs' clash with Milan

Brazilian battle ...Sandro tackles his international team-mate Robinho

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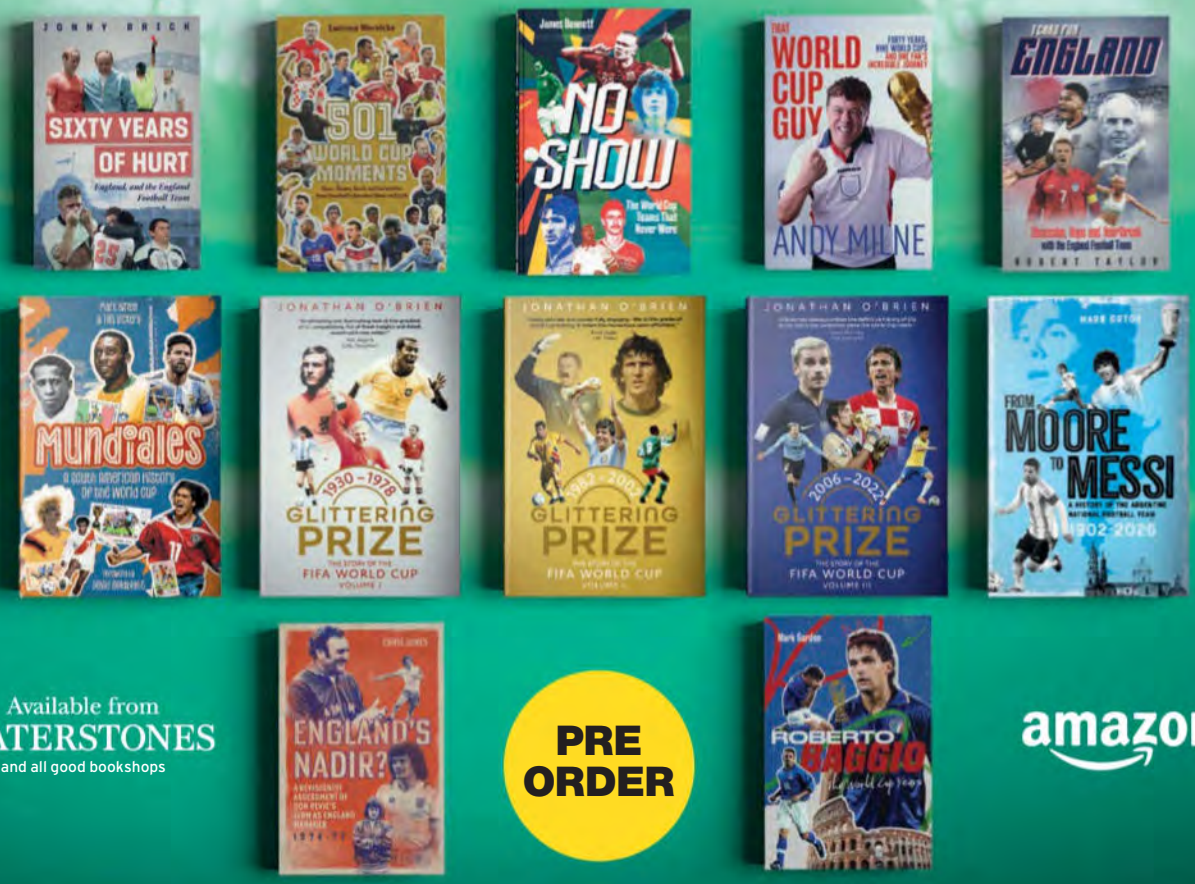

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